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or AWAKENED INDIA

A monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order
started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896



May 2010

Poetic Philosophy: Ramcharitmanas
Spiritual Ethos: Assamese, Marathi

Vol. 115, No. 5

THE ROAD TO WISDOM

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA ON VEDIC THOUGHT



FIRST, to tell you of the history of the rise of Vedanta. When it arose, India had already perfected a religion. Its crystallisation had been going on many years. Already there were elaborate ceremonies; already there had been perfected a system of morals for the different stages of life. But there came a rebellion against the mummeries and mockeries that enter into many religions in time, and great men came forth to proclaim through the Vedas the true religion. Hindus received their religion from the revelation of these Vedas. They were told that the Vedas were without beginning and without end. It may sound ludicrous to this audience—how a book can be without beginning or end; but by the Vedas no books are meant. They mean the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws discovered by different persons in different times.

The Hindus found their creed upon the ancient Vedas, a word derived from Vid, “to know”. These are a series of books which, to our minds, contain the essence of all religion; but we do not think they alone contain the truths. They teach us the immortality of the soul. In every country and every human breast there is a natural desire to find a stable equilibrium—something that does not change. We cannot find it in nature, for all the universe is nothing but an infinite mass of changes. But to infer from that that nothing unchanging exists is

to fall into the error of the Southern school of Buddhists and the Charvakas, which latter believe that all is matter and nothing mind, that all religion is a cheat, and morality and goodness, useless superstitions. The Vedanta philosophy teaches that man is not bound by his five senses. They only know the present, and neither the future nor the past; but as the present signifies both past and future, and all three are only demarcations of time, the present also would be unknown if it were not for something above the senses, something independent of time, which unifies the past and the future in the present.

The Vedas cannot show you Brahman, you are That already; they can only help to take away the veil that hides the truth from our eyes. The first veil to vanish is ignorance; and when that is gone, sin goes; next desire ceases, selfishness ends, and all misery disappears. This cessation of ignorance can only come when I know that God and I are one; in other words, identify yourself with Atman, not with human limitations. Dis-identify yourself with the body, and all pain will cease. This is the secret of healing. The universe is a case of hypnotisation; de-hypnotise yourself and cease to suffer.

From *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*,
1.232, 1.239, 7.46.



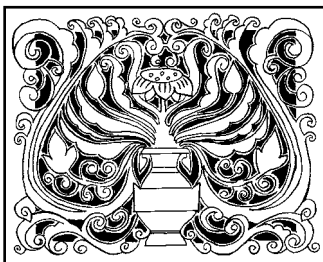
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Vol. 115, No. 5
May 2010

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INTERNET EDITION AT:

www.advaitaashrama.org

Cover photo: 'Spotlights'
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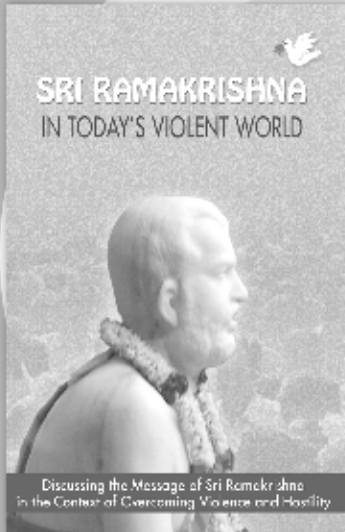
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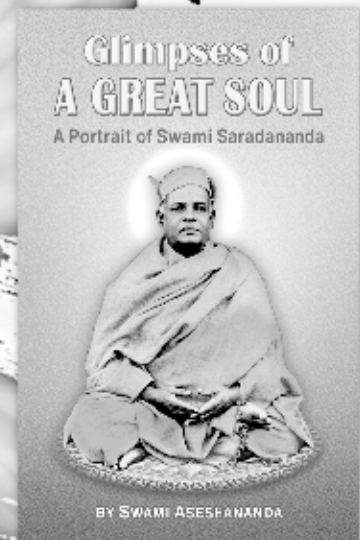
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TRADITIONAL WISDOM

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत । *Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!*

Dialectal Poetry

May 2010
Vol. 115, No. 5

O Mother, let there be created in my discourse (*Jnaneshwari*) oceans of the nine sentiments, and let it become a storehouse of the best gems; and let there be created mountains of interpretations conveying real meaning (as meant by Bhagavan). Let there be opened in the land of the Marathi language mines of gold in the form of literature; and let there be planted rows after rows of the creeping plant of right thinking. Let there be densely planted gardens of serious problems to be settled, with plenty of fruit in the form of discussions. ... Let there be a superabundance of Brahman-lore, metaphysics, in the town of this Marathi language; and let the give and take in the world be full of joy.

(Jnanadeva, *Jnaneshwari*, 12.11–13, 16)

Brother, the world abounds in men who are like ponds or rivers overflowing with their own floodwaters (that is, are pleased with their own growth); rare are those who, like the ocean, swell at the sight of the moon (of others' fortune). Humble is my lot and my ambition high; but I am confident of one thing, that the good will be gratified to hear my verses, though the evil will laugh. ... (For) it contains the gracious name of the Lord of Raghus—very pure, the essence of the Vedas and the Puranas, the abode of all that is auspicious, the destroyer of ill-fortune—which is ever repeated by Shiva along with Uma.

(Tulsidas, *Ramcharitmanas*, 1.8.7, 1.8, 1.10.1)

Mine is not a song of laughter and revelry,
cooling weary limbs;
Mine is a stroke on the harp of fire
that unifies the dead and the quick. ...
It is the outpouring of generous blood
towards the worship of the Mother's feet;
It is the healing word
that unites quarrelling brothers at a breath.

(Ambikagiri Raichoudhury, 'Mine Is Not a Song of Laughter')

THIS MONTH

As we approach the end of our series on the spiritual and cultural ethos underpinning the prolific regional language literature of India, we take a look at fruitful ways of **Reading Spiritual Literature**.

The *Ramcharitmanas* is a text that exemplifies the best literary, philosophic, and devotional traditions of India while rendering them into popular idiom. Sri A



P N Pankaj, a littérateur of repute from Chandigarh, spells this out in **The Poetic Philosophy of *Ramcharitmanas***.

Over the past two centuries not only has modern Assamese established itself as a distinct literary tradition, its spiritual ethos has also spread beyond its Vaishnava roots to evoke greater socioreligious activism. Dr Chandana Sarma, Lecturer, Department of Anthropology, Cotton College, Guwahati, dwells on these issues in **The Spiritual and Cultural Ethos of Modern Assamese Literature**.



Dr N B Patil, Honorary Professor, Anantacharya Indological Research Institute, Mumbai, presents a brief review of **Modern Marathi Literature: Its Cultural and Spiritual Roots** and delineates how the outpourings of the sant tradition and modern secular thought have interacted to create a rich literary tapestry.

The Blustering Bully is a psycho-spiritual reading of the Bhagavata character Paundraka and his imitation of and interaction with Krishna—an allegory for the ego and its interaction with the Self. The author, Sri N Hariharan, resides at Madurai.

Dr Arun Kumar Biswas, former Professor, Department of Metallurgy, Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, and Emeritus Fellow, Asiatic Society, Kolkata, concludes his reflections on **The Sacred Concept of Divine Mother Kali** with a look at the special relationship that Sri Ramakrishna and his followers have with Mother Kali.



Dr M Sivaramkrishna, former Head, Department of English, Osmania University, Hyderabad, surveys texts correlating tantra with yoga, Vedanta, Shaivism, women's issues, and popular traditions in the concluding section of **Tantra Today: Blind Spots and Balanced Studies**.

Sri Arnab Ganguly, Kolkata, provides a glimpse of an unusual ascetic in **Lead Us from Darkness to Light**.

In the third instalment of **Vedanta-sara** Swami Bhaskareswarananda, former President, Ramakrishna Math, Nagpur, dwells on some of the virtues that make one eligible for true comprehension and pursuit of Vedanta.

Swami Chetana-nanda, Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society of St Louis, takes us on journey following the footsteps of Sri Ramakrishna in **Mahendranath Gupta: A Guide to Dakshineswar and Kashipur**.



Reading Spiritual Literature

IN *Shivadhyan Brahmacharir Apurva Bhraman-vrittanta* (The Extraordinary Travel Account of Shivadhyan Brahmacharin)—an engaging allegorical record of the yoga way to enlightenment—Hariharananda Aranya, one of the foremost modern exponents of Patanjali's system of yoga, describes a meeting with an ascetic who, though intelligent and austere, was given to smoking ganja and, as a consequence, mixing up deep spiritual insights with tall talk. The ascetic Atmashraya Avadhut said to Shivadhyan Brahmacharin: 'You see Brahmachariji, Rama, Krishna and others, whom you know to be avatars, are not real avatars. ... Rama and others were all human beings. Having worshipped God through the "*So'ham*, I am That" mode, they came to think of themselves as God, as "I am Vishnu", "I am Shiva", and the like. The ignorant think of them as true incarnations of God on the basis of this realization. ... You know nothing of what a full incarnation of God would be like. That is a very profound truth, which I have heard from adept mahatmas.' 'Well, why not tell that to me too,' urged Shivadhyan Brahmacharin. 'I can, but you may not believe it. Listen to how a full manifestation of God is to take place. At that time a light will descend on every single village and city on earth. As everyone would be watching in wonder, a luminous form would emerge from each of these. None would doubt the birth and divinity of this incarnation, unlike what happens with your human avatars. Your avatars employ various ways to achieve their tasks, and also fail on occasions; it will not be so with this avatara. A perfect God has an irresistible will; whatever he wishes comes to pass instantaneously. He does not have to cut up sinners with a chakra or poke them with a trident. He will say, "Be you all righteous", and immedi-

ately everyone would so become. Your avatars are obeyed by some, and not by others; but this avatara would be respected by all. ... His name would be Kshmamoksha, liberator of the earth.' Shivadhyan Brahmacharin suppressed his laughter with great difficulty and said, 'Is all this written in your *Ganja Purana*?' Atmashraya Avadhut was upset. 'I know you would not be able to understand all this,' he said, and the topic was closed.

In a more reflective mood, Shivadhyan Brahmacharin was impressed by some of the insights hidden in this fantastic tale. We conceive of God with our limited minds and skewed imagination. Swami Vivekananda reminds us, 'We are by our present constitution limited and bound to see God as man. If the buffaloes want to worship God, they will see Him as a huge buffalo. If a fish wants to worship God, it will have to think of Him as a big fish.'

In trying to conceive of a perfect manifestation of the Divine, Atmashraya Avadhut could have been helped by the Bhagavadgita description of Arjuna's vision of Sri Krishna's cosmic form, a revelation that left Arjuna overwhelmed. Writing about the Gita translated by Christopher Isherwood and Swami Prabhavananda—'done in a simple, modern style, alternating between prose and poetry without sacrificing the majesty and wisdom of this ancient story'—Gerald Rosen says, 'If I had to choose one book to take to a desert island, this would be it. The ageless "Song of God" is, of course, a magnificent, sacred scripture and not technically a novel, but its narrative form makes it read like one.' A novel, of course, is a piece of fiction that 'deals imaginatively with human experience, ... contriving, through the written word, representations of human life that instruct or divert or both'. But the Gita, though a part of the epic Mahabharata, is not usually viewed

as fiction. What places it in a different category?

The epics Ramayana and Mahabharata—both of which are widely viewed as religious and spiritual literature—are full of lively imageries and charming descriptions of nature in its different moods: ‘The description of the rainy season in the Ramayana reveals the dextrous hand of a true artist. Flashes of lightening are fancied to be wounds on the body of the blue firmament. Vapour rising from the summer-parched earth after it is wet with showers appears to Rama like the tears shed by Sita. Lightning tries to pierce the dark clouds and shine through them, but its dazzling brightness is dimmed by them [just] as Sita, in Ravana’s captivity, is emaciated and bereft of all her lustre as she struggles to escape. Then the rumbling clouds, with their banners of lightning unfurled and garland of cranes on, are described as frantic elephants on the field of battle. The earth, [covered] with luxuriant vegetation and small insects of red and velvety colour, is conceived as a damsel wearing a parrot-like green wrapper with pink dots of lac-dye.’

Contrast the above description with that of the ‘tree of the universe’ which Acharya Shankara provides to spur us on the path of renunciation:

This tree of the universe is endowed with the unending and manifold miseries of birth, old age, death and grief; it changes its nature every moment. Like magic, a mirage, or a castle in the air, the universe is perceived, only to vanish ultimately. It is non-eternal, like a tree. ... The ultimate root of the universe is the Supreme Brahman ascertained by Vedanta; its seed is ignorance, desire, action, and the Unmanifest; its sprout is Hiranyagarbha, in which are combined the powers of knowledge and activity of the lower Brahman; its trunk is formed of the various subtle bodies of living beings; its haughty growth is hastened by the sprinkling of the waters of longing for enjoyment. Its tender shoots are the various objects of the organs of perception; its leaves are the Vedas, the Smritis, logic, and other forms of knowledge and instruction; its beautiful blossoms are such deeds as the multifarious sacrifices, gifts, and penances; its diverse tastes are the experiences of joy and sorrow; and its endless fruits are heaven and

the other planes enjoyed by living beings as the reward of their actions. Its numerous subsidiary roots are entwined together, fastened in the earth, and nourished by the waters of longing for the results of action. The nests in the tree have been built by birds, that is to say, all the living beings. ... The tree of the universe is constantly reverberating with the tumultuous noise arising from dancing, singing, instrumental music, sport, arrogant uproar, laughter, jostling, lamentations, and such exclamations as ‘Alas! I am done for!’ and ‘Leave me alone!’, induced by hilarity and weeping, which are the results of the happiness and unhappiness of living beings. Shaken constantly by the high winds of desires and their fruits, this tree can be felled only by the irresistible sword of detachment forged in the fire of knowledge of the identity of Brahman and Atman as taught in Vedanta.

Vividly sensuous descriptions abound in spiritual literature—from the Vedas to later philosophical commentaries—as do starkly ascetic counsel. Which of these is genuinely ‘spiritual’? Sri Ramakrishna reminds us: ‘The scriptures contain a mixture of sand and sugar, as it were. It is extremely difficult to separate the sugar from the sand. Therefore one should learn the essence of the scriptures from the teacher or from a sadhu. Afterwards what does one care for books?’ The spiritual is a profound realm, and one needs help to navigate purposefully through its voluminous literature. Sri Ramakrishna continues: ‘One should learn the essence of the scriptures from the guru and then practise sadhana. If one rightly follows spiritual discipline, then one directly sees God. The discipline is said to be rightly followed only when one plunges in. What will a man gain by merely reasoning about the words of the scriptures?’ And then he adds: ‘You may say, even though you dive deep you are still in danger of sharks and crocodiles, of lust and anger. But dive after rubbing your body with turmeric powder; then sharks and crocodiles will not come near you. The turmeric is discrimination and renunciation.’ May our study of spiritual literature be guided by competent directors so that we may be inspired to take the plunge.



The Poetic Philosophy of Ramcharitmanas

A P N Pankaj

*Varṇānām-artha-saṅghānām
rasānām chandasām-āpi;
Maṅgalānām ca kartārau
vande vāṇī-vināyakau.*

I pay obeisance to Saraswati and Ganesha, the creators of letter-clusters—that is, of words and sentences—and their meanings, as also of the aesthetic sentiments, metres, and (the resultant) auspiciousness.¹

ACCORDING TO THE INDIAN POETIC tradition, a poetic work is to begin with: (i) obeisance to God through any of his chosen deities or divine incarnations—Vani, Saraswati, or Vinayaka, Ganesha, are generally revered at the outset so that the poet may attain to wisdom and accomplish the objectives of the composition without impediment; (ii) indication of the subject matter; and (iii) a benedictory statement with a view to blessing the readers, or the audience in case of a *drśya kāvya*, dramatic presentation.

Ramcharitmanas is a *mahākāvya*, an epic poem; some also call it a *nāṭya mahākāvya*, a dramatic epic. That is because *rāmakathā*, the story of Rama, as narrated in *Manas*—short for *Ramcharitmanas*—is perhaps one of the most popular dramatic presentations of India. In fact, there are groups which stage *Ramalila* following each and every verse of *Manas*, with a singer reciting them in the background even as the action progresses onstage.

Manas has seven *kāṇḍas*, sections. Except for the sixth *kāṇḍa*, which bears the title ‘Lanka-kanda’ instead of the ‘Yuddha-kanda’ of Valmiki, all the other sections have been titled exactly as the *ādikavi* Valmiki named them: (i) Bala-kanda, (ii) Ayodhya-kanda, (iii) Aranya-kanda, (iv) Kishkindha-kanda, (v) Sundara-kanda, (vi) Lanka-kanda, and (vii) Uttara-kanda. Goswami Tulsidas, the author of

Manas, also calls these chapters *sopānas*, steps; thus ‘Balakanda’ is *prathama sopāna*, ‘Ayodhyakanda’ is *dvitiya sopāna*, and so on. Towards the end of *Manas* the poet explains the reason why he calls them so:

*Ehi mahan rucira sapta sopānā;
Raghupati-bhagati kera panthānā.
Ati hari-kṛpā jāhi para hoī;
Pāun dei ehin mārāga soī.*

In it [*Ramcharitmanas*] are seven beautiful steps that form the pathway to Raghupati’s bhakti. Only the one on whom Sri Hari bestows his abundant grace sets foot on this path (7.129.2).

Bhakti is thus attained through *Manas*, and it is only through divine grace that one can access these seven *kāṇḍas*.

Each of these *kāṇḍas* begins with the *maṅgalā-carana*, invocatory verses, in Sanskrit. The first shloka of ‘Bala-kanda’, in Anushtubh metre, has been given in the epigraph above. Apart from being an obeisance to Saraswati and Ganesha, it is also of importance in understanding Tulsī’s poetic standpoint. The poet pronounces the letter ‘va’, *varṇānām*, right in the beginning. In the second line ‘va’ occurs thrice: *vande, vāṇī, vināyakau*. The concluding verse in ‘Uttara-kanda’ ends with ‘vāḥ’: *dahyanti no mānavāḥ*. ‘Va’ is *amṛta-bīja*, seed of immortality. *Manas* has this *amṛta-bīja* in its roots; as this tree of *Manas* achieves full fruition, this seed reappears on its crest, multiplied manifold, and by going back to the soil that nurses the roots, it keeps proliferating. Thus the *amṛta* spreads. By using the same ‘va’ in *vande, vāṇī, and vināyaka*, Tulsī extends the blessings of Saraswati and Ganesha on the three worlds, as it were: ‘As a result of my propitiation of the two deities at the very outset, may my

work spread the *amṛta* of *rāma-nāma* in the three worlds, and may this nectar continue to flow generation after generation.' In the 'Kishkindha-kanda' invocation the poet says:

*Dhanyāste kṛtinah pibanti satatam
śrī-rāma-nāmāmṛtam.*

Blessed are those fortunate people who drink the nectar that is Rama's name (4. invocatory verse 2).

Opening the *mahākāvya* with Anushtubh metre is also of considerable significance. Anushtubh is one of Saraswati's names. By using this metre, Tulsi salutes Vak Devi, the deity of speech, in the very first syllable. It is also the metre in which the first shloka of classical Sanskrit literature had sprung from the lips of Valmiki:

*Mā niṣāda prātiṣṭhām tvam-agamaḥ
śāśvātī samāḥ;
Yat-krauñca-mithunād-ekam-avadhiḥ
kāma-mohitam.*

O Nishada! May you be deprived of stability for all time, for you killed one of a pair of curlews in the throes of passion.²

Hanuman before Rama



Tulsi, whom millions of devotees consider an incarnation of Valmiki, pays tribute to the latter by using the Anushtubh metre for invoking the grace of the two deities. This metre, containing four *pādas*, quarters, is traditionally considered most

appropriate for invocation or praise, as the term *anuṣṭubh* literally means 'following in praise': *anu nirantaram stubhyate anayā iti anuṣṭup*. For the purpose of invocation it is next only to *gāyatrī*, the Vedic metre having three *pādas*, in which the Gayatri mantra is composed.

Sāhitya: Composition, Association, Fellowship

Let us now deal with the meaning and purport of the first invocatory verse: 'Vā' implies 'power', 'auspiciousness', and 'reverence'. In the poetic context 'power' means *prabhāva*, efficacy or influence. The poet of *Manas* is certainly looking for the manifestation of this power in his work. We shall see in the following passages his prayer for this power as well as his confidence, expressed at the end, in the saving effect of his composition, for the reader or listener of *Manas* 'will be saved from being burnt by the scorching rays of the sun of samsara'. We shall also see his prayer for *maṅgala*, auspiciousness, and *sammāna*, reverence.

Tulsi speaks of *varṇa-saṅghas* and *artha-saṅghas*, clusters of letters and meanings. What is the relationship between the two? Clustered letters—the words—form a chain that extends into sentences, stanzas, or paragraphs. A *kāvya*, poem, is thereby born. Incidentally, *kāvya* as understood in Sanskrit is not necessarily poetry alone; it could be drama, novel, short story, and it can be written in verse, prose, or a mix of both. In Hindi the word *kāvya* has, however, crystallized to mean only poetry. In English too the word 'poetry' is restricted to mean a composition in verse, notwithstanding that there are verseless poems as well.

Another synonym for literature in Sanskrit and Hindi is *sāhitya*, which comprises all the different fine arts based on words and associated meanings. Literally, *sāhitya* means association, fellowship, togetherness; *sāhitya* is therefore an inseparable association or fellowship of mean-

ings and words. This Kalidasa conveys through the term *samprkta*, which means connected or blended together—*vāgarthāviva samprktau*,³ blended like word and meaning—even as he takes cognizance of their dual character by mentioning two names and by using the dvandva compound. Tulsi says it more clearly:

*Girā aratha jala bīci sama
kabiata bhinna na bhinna.*

(Sita and Rama are) like word and meaning, or water and wave—not separate, though spoken of separately.⁴

This togetherness—*sāhitya, sahitasya bhāvam*—has another connotation. Meanings and words, in that order, are initially with the author. A thought, a sense, an idea, an intense feeling or emotion—any, some, or all of them together—create ripples in the author’s mind. They seek outlet, and just as a bird’s irresistible urge for expression in the morning hours results in its chirping, these thoughts and ideas come out on the wings of words. Thus, when Valmiki is intensely moved by seeing the plight of the curlew couple, the *karuṇa rasa*, pathos, dormant in his heart finds words, comes out as a shloka, and leaves him surprised: ‘*Kimidaṁ vyāhṛtaṁ mayā*; what is this that I have uttered?’⁵ A thought remains in incubation for a certain time before it is released in words. Even in the case of Valmiki, after he produced the first shloka, the Ramayana was not narrated in one day; it had to pass through a long process of work. Short poems are composed in minutes or hours, though sometimes even these take a relatively long time. Tulsi has written several short couplets and verses, and as we wonder at their beauty, we also keep guessing how much time each would have taken to compose. As for *Ramcharitmanas*, it took him two years, seven months, and twenty-six days to complete.

Short or long, for the poet this period entails spiritual and emotional turmoil and is characterized by a strange restlessness which, even as it disturbs, delights. Sentiments connect with sentences, and together they weave a symphony of ec-



The Romance of Rama and Sita, (c.1880); illuminated miniature painting

stasy. Not for nothing has *sāhitya-rasa*, the flavour of literature, been equated with *brahmānanda*—*brahamānanda sahodaraḥ*, akin to the bliss of Brahman. So, when Tulsi says that ‘for the joy of my heart I composed this story of Raghunatha in exquisitely charming vernacular’⁶, he only expresses that state of a poet’s being in which he lives—and loves to live—through the entire period of creative fermentation: a state of experiencing the fellowship between meanings and words.

But there is another kind of togetherness as well. Words have an earthly character which renders them imperfect, though a divine provenance has been claimed for the Vedas, the Bible, the Quran, and such other texts. Otto Jespersen says:

No one language has arrived at perfection; an ideal language would always express the same thing by the same, and similar things by similar means, any irregularity or ambiguity would be banished; sound and sense would be in perfect harmony; any number of delicate shades of meaning could be expressed with equal ease; poetry and prose, beauty and truth, thinking and feeling would be equally provided for: the human spirit would have found a garment combining freedom and gracefulness,

fitting it closely and yet allowing full play to any movement. ... But, however far our present languages are from that ideal, we must be thankful for what has been achieved.⁷

It is through this medium of words, however imperfect, that the poet goes out to express himself. Much as he delights in his own creation by being in communion with his poems, in solitude, he does feel the need to connect—connect with someone else. As the Upanishadic seer would say: ‘*Sa vai naiva reme tasmād-ekāki na ramate sa dvitīyam-aicchat*; no pleasure he had, so none can be happy when alone, a second he sought’;⁸ even the Supreme Being—incidentally, also called *kavi*, poet—seeks a second. What the poet experiences within himself must be shared, and thus the term *sāhitya* gets another meaning: fellowship of the poet and his audience. As he transfers his creation—which he does even while retaining it within himself—to another person, the poet engenders a kind of synergy that spreads and multiplies his joy. This process of transference also has several implications. As it goes to the listeners or readers, they find new meanings, which are at times altogether different from those that the poet might have intended. Thus, following the reversal of the process of mean-

ing and word—with words coming first to the recipient and meaning thereafter—the imperfection of language which Jespersen refers to also becomes a cause of strength, inasmuch as the meanings become many: ‘*Kaviḥ karoti kāvyāni rasam jānāti paṇḍitaḥ*; the poet composes poems, the connoisseur knows its flavour’, as a popular verse goes. Interpretations and commentaries follow, each recipient discovering his or her own meaning, purport, and aesthetic experience. What was meant to be *svāntaḥ sukhāya*, for the joy of one’s own heart, no longer remains only that—it enters into others’ hearts as well.

Recognition

For Tulsi, the connoisseur is an important touchstone, and he values their evaluation of a poet’s work:

*Jo prabandha budha nabin ādarahin;
So śrama bādi bāla kabi karahin.*

A literary composition which does not earn the respect of sages is like wasted infantile labour.⁹

Tulsi, therefore, seeks the blessings of poets like Vyasa and other past, present, and future poets, including those who expound the acts of Hari, God, in vernacular languages (1.14.1–3). He feels that saints are the real connoisseurs, and so adds:

*Hobu prasanna debu baradanū;
Sādbu-samāja bhaniti sanamānū.*

Be pleased with me and grant me the boon that my narrative may be respected in the comity of saints (1.14.4).

But Tulsi also has a larger audience in his mind. One reason he chose *bhāṣā*, vernacular, for his *mahākāvya* is that he wanted his message to reach the common masses, for their own good. Had he written *Manas* in Sanskrit, he would have earned the approbation of scholars—and, in fact, he was subjected to

Rama Learning from a Hermit in the Forest



criticism by detractors for not doing so. All the same, he chose the vernacular medium and declared:

*Kīrati bhaniti bhūti bhali sōi;
Surasari sama saba kahan hita hōi.*

Glory, poetry, and prosperity are good only if they, like the Ganga, bring beneficence to all (1.14.5).

The four hundred and thirty-five years that have elapsed since its composition bear witness to the immense beneficence that *Manas* has brought to countless generations of common people in India, besides earning the respect and reverence of saints, sages, and scholars. Young and old, men and women, princes and paupers, pandits and illiterates, all alike find some good or other in *Manas*—the joy of reciting, singing, or listening to it is common to all.

Sāhitya, we have noted, connects the creator with his or her readers and listeners. *Manas* is one of the best examples of this. J T F Jordens testifies: ‘His [Tulsi’s] *Rām-charit-mānas*, the *Lake of the Story of Rāma*, has been rightly called the Bible of north India.’¹⁰

Rasa: the Poetic Sentiment

From words and meanings *rasa* is generated. We have used this word *rasa* earlier. It is variously rendered in English as essence, flavour, taste, sentiment, mood, and aesthetic experience. Depending upon the context, each of these meanings could be correct. In this article we have either left this term untranslated or rendered it as ‘sentiment’. The Shruti says: ‘*Yadvai tat sukr̥tam, raso vai sah, rasam hyevāyam labdhvā’nandī bhavati*; That which is known as the Self-made is verily the source of joy, for one becomes happy by coming in contact with that source of joy.’¹¹ Acharya Shankara, in his commentary on this statement observes: ‘Rasa is that which brings about satisfaction, causes bliss. ... On obtaining this rasa, one feels happy. ... There is the bliss of Brahman, which knowers of Brahman experience. Men of this sort have no external means to depend upon, cherish no desire and undertake no efforts. Yet they seem to be happy like those who have all the external joys at their command. Brah-

man alone is their happiness.’¹²

For Tulsi, this Brahman, this *rasa* that is bliss, is none other than Sri Rama, son of Dasharatha. A mere drop from that ocean of bliss keeps the three worlds in comfort:

*Jo ānanda-sindhu sukharāsī;
Sikara ten trailoka supāsī.
So sukhadhāma rāma asa nāmā;
Akhila loka dāyaka biśrāmā.*

He, the embodiment of joy and the ocean of felicity—a drop of which fills the three worlds with joy—shall be called ‘Rama’, the very abode of bliss and the comfort of all the worlds.¹³

Further, the poet says:

*Jo mohi rāma lāgate mīṭhe;
Tau navarasa-ṣaḍrasa-rasa-anarasa
hvai jāte saba sīṭhe.*

If only I had experienced the sweetness of Rama, other varieties of *rasas*—the nine *rasas* and the six—would have become insipid for me.¹⁴

(To be continued)

Notes and References

1. *Ramcharitmanas*, 1.1.
2. *Ramayana*, 1.2.15.
3. Kalidasa, *Raghuvamsha*, 1.1.
4. *Ramcharitmanas*, 1.18.
5. *Ramayana*, 1.2.16.
6. *Ramcharitmanas*, ‘Bala-kanda’, invocatory verse 7.
7. Otto Jespersen, *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959), 442.
8. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 1.4.3; translation from Som Raj Gupta, *The Word Speaks to the Faustian Man*, 5 vols (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2008), 5.109.
9. *Ramcharitmanas*, 1.14.4.
10. J T F Jordens, ‘Medieval Hindu Devotionalism’ in *A Cultural History of India*, ed. A L Basham (New Delhi: Oxford, 2008), 275.
11. *Taittiriya Upanishad*, 2.7.1.
12. *The Word Speaks to the Faustian Man*, 3.195.
13. *Ramcharitmanas*, 1.197.3.
14. Tulsidas, *Vinay Patrika*, 169.1. The *navarasas* are the nine aesthetic sentiments; the *ṣaḍrasas*, six *rasas*, of food are: *kaṭu*, pungent; *amla*, sour; *madhura*, sweet; *lavana*, saline; *tikta*, bitter; and *kaṣāya*, astringent.



The Spiritual and Cultural Ethos of Modern Assamese Literature

Dr Chandana Sarma

The Brahmaputra at Guwahati

THE CHARYAPADAS, mystic songs composed by Buddhist monks between the eighth and twelfth centuries, constitute the earliest Assamese literature. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries writers like Hema Saraswati, Madhava Kandali, and Haribara Bipra wrote *kavyas*—stories in rhyme—with themes drawn mainly from the epics and the Puranas. The translation of the Ramayana was a landmark of this period. The latter half of the fifteenth century is known as the golden period of Assamese literature. It was during this time that Srimanta Shankaradeva (?1449–1568) strengthened the spiritual foundation of Assamese literature with his Vaishnava works. Drawing inspiration from the epics and the Puranas, Shankaradeva and his disciples—such as Madhavadeva and Rama Saraswati—contributed a wealth of myths, legends, plays, spiritual verses, and songs to Assamese literature. Through his various compositions, Shankaradeva preached the worship of one God over the existent practice of adoring many deities and inspired others to follow his footsteps. Very soon he was successful in bringing about a renaissance in the field of religion and literature in Assam.

In the Middle Ages a number of Muslims of the Mughal Empire came and settled down in Assam with a view to establishing closer ties with the Ahoms. Among them was Azan Fakir (17th

cent.), a devout poet who composed numerous *jikirs* and *jaris*. A *jikir* is a song describing Islamic rites and customs. *Jaris* are laments narrating vividly the death of Imams Hasan and Hussain at Karbala. By the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth, a number of Arabic and Persian words had entered the Assamese vocabulary through these *jikirs* and *jaris*. In addition, three other poetic works reveal a familiarity with Sufi literature: *Mrigawati Charitra* by Dwija Ram, *Madhumalati* by an anonymous poet, and *Chandrawali Vishwaketu* by Pashupati Dwija.

Various scholars have attempted to classify Assamese literature into different periods to highlight changes in the subject matter and nature of important compositions. Since I intend to focus on modern Assamese literature, I have divided this phase into three sub-phases: pre-romantic era, romantic era, and post-romantic era. Of course, in the ultimate analysis these are not natural divisions. There has been a marked increase in the number of writers since the 1930s. Moreover, certain writers transcend categorization and cannot be pigeonholed into any category.

Pre-romantic Era (1836–89)

With the coming of the British in 1826 Assam witnessed not merely a change in its political scenario,

its literary compositions also underwent a dramatic change. Assamese literature received a new perspective during the British period. Therefore, critics often consider the period beginning with the British rule in Assam as the modern era of Assamese literature. The literature of the early part of this era was markedly influenced by Christian missionaries, who came to Assam in 1836. Not only did these missionaries try to spread Christianity, they also attempted to revive the Assamese language. It was only through their efforts that, in 1873, Assamese was again established as the medium of instruction in schools and courts in lieu of Bengali. The missionaries presented the Assamese community with a new gift: the monthly magazine *Arunoday* (Sunrise), which was first brought out in 1846. This magazine published translations of biblical stories as well as various historical and scientific works, biographies, nature stories, and news items. The Assamese Christian Levi Nidhi Farewell (1828–73) based his poetic compositions on ancient Vaishnava poems. His poems, published in *Arunoday*, include ‘Nistaror Upay’ (Means of Redemption) and ‘Norokor Biboron’ (Description of Hell). Since the publication of *Arunoday*, Assamese literature has been shaped and reshaped by a number of journals which dominated the literary scene and introduced new features and trends.

The Romantic Era (1890–1938)

Nathan Brown (1807–86), Miles Bronson (1812–83), Levi Nidhi, Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan (1829–96), Gunabhiram Barua (1837–95), Hemchandra Barua (1835–96) were among the architects of *Arunoday*, a magazine marked by depth and gravity. The *Jonaki* (Firefly), published by a group of Assamese students from Calcutta, heralded the romantic age of Assamese literature. The stalwarts of this age include Lakshminath Bezbarua (1868–1938), Chandrakumar Agarwala (1867–1938), Padmanath Gohain Barua (1871–1946), and Hemchandra Goswami (1872–1928). The romantic age continued right up to the beginning of the Second World War with such littérateurs as Raghunath Choudhury (1879–1968), Nilamoni Phukan Sr

(1880–1978), Jatindranath Dowerah (1892–1964), Ambikagiri Raichoudhury (1885–1967), Banikanta Kakati (1894–1952), Dimbeshwar Neog (1899–1966), Debakanta Barua (1914–96), and Nalinibala Devi (1898–1977) sustaining the trend.

Lakshminath Bezbaruah is a prominent figure in Assamese literature. He gave a new impetus to Assamese, enriching it through his essays, plays, fiction, and poetry. Being a sensitive artist, he responded actively to the influences of his social environment. His creative literature reflected the deeper urges of the people of Assam. He is known as *roxoraj*, the king of humour, for his popular satirical writings; he has also been given the title *sahityarathi*, expert in all branches of literature. He wrote one novel and several short stories and dramas, besides satires and biographies; he also brought out a compilation of Assamese folk tales for children. Right from his childhood, Lakshminath was influenced by the Vaishnava faith and culture and the Satra traditions of the Shankaradeva movement. His father Dinanath Bezbarua was a devout Vaishnava, whose deep respect towards Vaishnavism had a significant impact on Lakshminath’s writings. Lakshminath beautifully explicated the philosophy of the neo-Vaishnava faith in his biographies of Shankaradeva and Madhavadeva. His scholarly writings on the philosophy and literature of these saints left a deep mark of self-confidence and self-belief on the minds of the Assamese and helped disseminate the new wave of Vaishnava culture throughout Assam. His *Tattwa Katha* (Discussion on Metaphysical Principles) is an important work comprising eleven articles on religion, including such issues as Ishvara, dharma, the nature of Sri Krishna, the Vedas, the Bhagavadgita, the Bhagavata, bhakti, and Nama Dharma. He wrote these articles to place the religion of Shankaradeva and Madhavadeva on a firm philosophical footing. In the very first essay he points out that religion and God are indispensable aspects of human existence. Being part of God, humans cannot live without thinking of him. The people of the Kali Yuga worship God through nine forms of sattvic bhakti. The foremost among these is

shravana, listening to the glories of God, and kirtan, singing his praise. Shankaradeva, Madhavadeva, and Damodaradeva have shown that *shravana*-kirtan of Hari's name is the sole way of attaining salvation. Bezbarua quotes a verse from Madhavadeva:

*Baikunthe prakashe hari nam rase
prem amritara bani;
Srimanta shankare paro bhangi dila
bahe brahmandaka bhed.*

In the ambrosial river of love that is Hari's name lies Vaikuntha, the salvation made known by Shankaradeva; and it flows transcending the bounds of the universe.

In 'Krishna-tattwa' Lakshminath dwells on the manly deeds of Sri Krishna. According to Vedic teaching, truth, purity, and bliss are the very nature of Brahman. What the Vedas describe as Brahman is none other than Sri Krishna, the son of Devaki, according to the Vaishnava faith. This has been elaborated upon by Bezbarua. Through his articles, Bezbarua has shown that Shankaradeva based his Eka-sharana Nama Dharma on the teachings of the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Gita, and the Bhagavata. He shows how Shankaradeva borrowed the idea of devotion to one God from the Gita. Devotion is the best way of worshipping God. Shankaradeva's religion does not search for the lineage of either the brahmanas or the outcaste chandalas. Bezbarua's is perhaps the first modern elucidation of the Eka-sharana Nama Dharma, which elevates its universal humanitarian creed of non-violence and love to a higher spiritual plane—this is indeed a very noteworthy contribution to the religious and social life of Assam.

Ambikagiri Raichoudhury was another important figure of the romantic era. His poems are marked by 'a mystic note of love, a strong sense of the vigour of life, and an intense patriotism'. His book on poetry *Tumi* (You)—'full of music and melody'—gives an idea of his view of the supernatural realm. Here Raichoudhury explains, with remarkable intensity of feeling, that the Creator manifests in different forms in this universe:

*Tumi—lajor rangoli abha gabhorur golapi galot;
Tumi—shantir jironikhini senehir bahur tolot.*

You—the red blushes on the pink cheeks
of a teenage girl;
You—the peaceful rest under the arms
of the beloved.

But Raichoudhury's poetry not only reflects his spiritual nature, it also reveals a revolutionary mind filled with deeply nationalist thoughts. These nationalist poems are strewn across such collections as *Bina* (Lute), *Anubhuti* (Experience), *Sthapan Kor Sthapan Kor* (Establish, Establish), *Deshei Bhagowan* (God Is in the Country), and *Bedanar Ulka* (Meteor of Suffering).

Nalinibala Devi and Dharmeshwari Devi Barua (1892–1960) are two remarkable women poets of this period. Though both of them underwent great suffering, they regarded it as part of God's blessings. The aspiration for union with God is reflected in their works, but the spiritual influence is more noticeable in Nalinibala's writings. Kavya Bharati Dharmeshwari Devi surmounted immense physical and mental afflictions on her way to becoming a poet of repute: 'Soon after her marriage to Durganath Barua, Dharmeshwari Devi was struck by a debilitating illness that left her an invalid. Poetry and the love and support of her husband, which she expressed in her poetry, sustained her, but she was soon widowed.' In spite of all these sufferings, she made her emphatic poetic voice heard through such works as *Fulor Harai* (Bouquet of Flowers), *Pranar Parash* (Touch of the Soul), and *Ashrudhan aru Jivantari* (Wealth of Tears and the Boat of Existence). 'Though she takes her imagery from nature, her poetry reveals a strong devotion to the Creator.' According to her, there is no use searching for God in the hills and valleys, oceans and cities, skies and winds. She believes that God, who is all-pervading, particularly resides in the soul of each human being. If you yearn for him with true devotion, then God will surely accept you with open arms. Dharmeshwari Devi was awarded the title Kavya Bharati by the Asom Sahitya Sabha in 1956.

Though widowed at a very early age, Nalinibala

Devi rose above this misfortune to become a prolific poet and writer. Her poetic works include *Sandhiyar Sur* (Twilight), *Saponor Sur* (Dream Tune), *Parashmani* (Touchstone), *Yugadevata* (Deity of the Age), *Jagriti* (Awakening), *Alkananda*, and *Antimor Sur* (Concluding Tune). *Sandhiyar Sur* vividly reflects the spiritual bent of Nalinibala's mind. She sees divine beauty in various natural objects. The aspiration to find this divine beauty is expressed in her poem *Param Trishna* (Ultimate Desire):

*Manuhar dusoku ashim hundaryya trishna
sukh asha hepah bukur;
Nohoi I morotor hontekiya jibonor;
Sukh asha param padar
rup trishna sira sundar.*

The eyes of humankind reflect the desire for absolute beauty and happiness, as well as aspirations of the heart. This is not a temporary earthly matter; it is a longing for divine happiness and desire for the ultimate beauty of the Almighty.

Nalinibala's poetic sentiments and expressions are comparable to those of Rabindranath Tagore. Her place in the Assamese poetic pantheon was acknowledged even in her lifetime through her designation as president of the Asom Sahitya Sabha in 1954.

The sisters Jamuneshwari Khataniyar (1899–1924) and Rasheshwari Khataniyar (1902–82) are two other notable poets of this period whose works reflect spiritualism.

Post-romantic Era (1939–)

The Second World War and the Indian freedom movement served to usher in an era of realistic writing in Assam. Leftist ideology and Freudian psychology are the other discernible elements in the works of this period. The multifaceted Jyotiprasad Agarwala (1903–51)—who was a dramatist, lyricist, musician, writer, poet, artist, and filmmaker—started his literary career before the War, but went on to make significant contributions to Assamese drama and music during this period. Amulya Barua (1922–46), Kalaguru Bishnuprasad Rabha (1919–69), Phani Sharma (1910–70), Syed

Abdul Malik (1919–2000), Birendrakumar Bhattacharyya (1924–97), Maheshwar Neog (1915–95), Jogesh Das (b.1927), and Hem Barua (1915–77) are amongst the pioneers of this era who have enriched Assamese literature with their writings.

Syed Abdul Malik, one of the most popular literary figures of Assam, entered the world of literature in the 1940s. He wrote numerous short stories, novels, poems, and essays; and most of his works reveal the contemporary social environment. *Dhanya Nara Tonu Bhalo* (Blessed Is the Noble Human Body), one of his last novels, is based on the life and works of Srimanta Shankaradeva. This novel not only highlights the Mahapurusha's life but also gives a glimpse of the history of Assam, of contemporary Assamese social life—including the lives of common people—and the different arts and crafts of Assam. The Ahom kingdom occupied the east of Assam, Bhutan was to the north, the Koch in the west, and Kacharis ruled in the south. The Barobhuiyans ruled a small village in the Brahmaputra valley between these kingdoms. Bordowa, from where the Bhuiyans reigned, decided to construct a Shiva temple. The Bhuiyans were Shaktas. Even Shankaradeva was brought up within this Shakta environment. But during the construction of the temple a Vishnu image was unearthed. So, it was decided that a Vishnu temple would be built in place of the proposed Shiva temple. Malik has narrated this episode in a masterly manner. Shankaradeva emphasized that all members of society, including brahmanas, need to be present at the time of laying the foundation of the temple. Vishnu belongs to all and we all belong to Vishnu, he said.

In 1993 Lakshminandan Bora (b.1931)—a famous story writer, novelist, and former president of Asom Sahitya Sabha—wrote *Jakeri Nahike Upamo* (One that Bears No Comparison), an Assamese novel on the life of Mahapurush Shankaradeva. Bora spent his early childhood and teenage years at Hatichung in Nagaon. Having been brought up within the Vaishnava culture, he believes that the Shankaradeva of his novel is more real than the one found in traditional biographies, the *charit-puthis*. He has indeed

depicted the wonderful personality of Shankaradeva successfully in his novel. Once, when Shankaradeva and some of his followers—Madhavadeva, Narayan Ata, Madhava of Jayanti, and others—were crossing the Luit, Shankaradeva requested them to compose *bhanitas*, poems. Madhavadeva instantly sang out:

*Jai guru shankar sarvo gunakor
jakeri nahike upamo;
Tohari saranaka renu satakouti
bareko koruho pranamo.*

Glory to Guru Shankaradeva, the treasure-house of all good traits, who has no peer—I bow down to the dust of your feet a thousand million times.

On the sudden death of his daughter Rukmini, Shankaradeva was heartbroken. Lakshminandan's novel gives a charming description of the way Madhavadeva consoled him. 'Fate is shrewd', says Madhavadeva. 'No one can escape fate. Even a king is turned into a beggar by fate. That is why the learned do not pay any heed to such matters. The lotus blooms in water, but water cannot moisten it. You, Shankaradeva, are a learned person. Mundane matters cannot touch you. At present you must be a bit more firm. You are performing the duties of the Grihastha Ashrama only because you have taken human form to relieve humanity of its suffering.' The novel portrays the author not as a religious person but as a person with an explanatory mindset, impartial observation, and whole-hearted awe.

Birendrakumar Bhattacharya, a recipient of the prestigious Jnanpith Award, is a noted literary figure and novelist of this period. He was awarded the Sahitya Academy Award for his novel *Iyaruvingam* (People's Reign), which gives a true picture of the culture of the Tangkhul Nagas. Just before he wrote this novel, Bhattacharya served as a teacher among the Tangkhul Nagas of Ukhrul; consequently, he became very familiar with their socio-cultural environment, customs, and lifestyle. Set in the Naga Hills of the pre-independence era, *Iyaruvingam* highlights 'the divisions that arise out of ideological differences. One group within Naga society believes in Subhash Chandra Bose's message of active, armed resistance

to the British in India with the help of the Japanese army; the other group has faith in Gandhi's non-violent methods. In the end, though the first group is victorious and attempts to form an independent state in the Naga Hills, it is clear that the larger nationalistic forces will ultimately take over. Bhattacharya's novels consistently question and reveal the false assumptions on which society's definitions of freedom, nationalism, faith, and religion are based.' As this particular novel is based on the Naga society, it depicts the rules and regulations of this society—their way of life and behaviour—in its totality.

Nirmalprabha Bordoloi (1933–2004) started writing poetry at the tender age of nine. The world around her, vibrant with the culture of Vaishnava serenity, provided her with the necessary inspiration. She wrote poetry 'to improve her mental health and to add to her awareness, with a firm belief in the eternal values of life. According to her, these values will break all barriers of time and space and rouse confidence in the innate strength of the soul. She thinks the greatest obligation of a poet under the present diseased social circumstances is to make humanity live for ever.' Described as the greatest poet of this age, she has eighty-five books to her credit, including nine poetic anthologies. She received the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in 1983 for her collection of poems *Sudirgha Din aru Rati* ('The Long Day and Night'). Apart from poetry, she composed thought-provoking essays, plays, and literature for the young. She made 'an in-depth and elaborate study of the original source-materials connected with Tantrik Sadhana of Assam, like *Yogini Tantra*, *Kalika Purana*, coupled with field studies of the Thans [religious institutions of the Shankaradeva tradition] and temples connected with Shakti worship of Assam. The result is her monumental work *Devi*. The book has received wide acclaim. Asom Sahitya Sabha recognized the book as an outstanding contribution in the field of original research and presented her an award. The Sanskrit Samaj of Assam conferred the title *Saraswati* on the writer for this work. Another highly researched work of hers is *Shiva*, dealing with the evolution of the cult of Shiva

in Assam against an all-India perspective.'

Navakanta Barua (1926–2002)—a recipient of the Sahitya Academy, Padma Bhushan, and Assam Valley Literary awards—started writing in the 1940s. His poetic works reveal 'a symbolic, often surrealistic, often dramatic approach to his depiction of the gradual destruction of modern society'. His poetic vision expressed through a career spanning six decades has established him as one of the leading poets of Assam. His approach is modern, which also includes the romantic. The natural landscape of Assam, especially its rivers, traditional folk songs, and folk dances are the main subjects of his works. Some of his compositions suggest that at some point in life he was influenced by Christianity and Buddhism. His poem 'Ananta Jishu Ananta Sishu' (Eternal Jesus, Eternal Child) is dedicated to Mother Teresa. 'Buddhaka Jetia Mor Mritadehe Log Pale' (When My Dead Body Met Buddha), published in his poetic collection *More aru Prithibir* (Mine and the World's) hints at the Buddhist influence. Navakanta was the president of Asom Sahitya Sabha in 1968 and presided over the Asom Sahitya Sabha convention in 1990.

Indira Goswami (b.1942), known popularly in Assam as Mamoni Raisom Goswami, started writing from a very early age. In the opening pages of her autobiography *Adha Lekha Dastabej* (Unfinished Document), she mentions that 'she always had the inclination to jump into the Crinoline waterfall located near her house in Shillong. She was extremely attached to her father and was broken mentally after his death. Repeated suicide attempts studded her eventful life.' After the death of her husband Madhavan Raisom Ayengar in a car accident in Kashmir, just eighteen months after their marriage, she joined the Goalpara Sainik School as a teacher.

'At this point she went back to writing. She claims, she wrote just to live; otherwise it wouldn't have been possible for her to go on living. ... After working in Goalpara Sainik School, she was persuaded by her teacher Upendra Chandra Lekharu to come to Vrindavan and pursue research as well as for peace of mind.' Her experiences as a widow



A tea garden in Assam

and researcher finds expression in her novel *Nilkantha Braja* (Blue-necked Vraja), which is about the plight of the Radheswamis of Vrindavan who lived in abject poverty and suffered from sexual exploitation. In this novel Indira Goswami introduces a plethora of other characters—a young Harijan girl, Thakur Sahib, Sherafi, the wife of a rich Seth, Chandrabhanu Rakesh, an able but indignant artist, besides a host of Radheswamis—to embellish the tale. All the incidents take place within Vraja itself, and the writer's credit lies as much in delineating with sympathetic insight the fortunes of the main characters as in elevating the environment of Vraja to the level of a character. It is not the ups and downs of the human protagonists of the story alone that the writer has depicted in this novel; the perennial inhabitants of Vraja have also been presented with equal emphasis. The change of times that have overwhelmed Vraja and the present degeneration from its ancient glory—with the changed lifestyle of the priests in particular—have all been shown with assiduous care and feeling. In her novel Indira Goswami exposed the uglier face of Vrindaban, the city of Sri Krishna. Such powerful depiction of the life and spirit of this ancient place is rare and makes this work a classic in modern Indian literature. It was also the first novel to be written on this subject.

In Vrindaban Indira was also involved in Ramayana studies: 'A massive volume of Tulsidas's Ramayana bought during her stay there for just eleven rupees was the source of this inspiration. Later this finds expression in the unparalleled comparative

study of Tulsidas's Ramayana and the fourteenth century Assamese Ramayana—the first Ramayana to be written in a regional Indian language—written by Madhava Kandali, in her work *Ramayana from Ganga to Brahmaputra*.

Tejaru Dhulire Dhusarita Prishtha (Pages Stained with Blood and Dust) and *Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howda* (The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker), two of her important works, were written while she was working at Delhi University. 'In *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* she writes about the plight of Assamese Brahmin widows in the religious institutions of Assam called Satra. This novel has been made into a film called *Adajhya* (Non-inflammable), which won several national and international awards. ... At the peak of her literary career, she wrote the famous and controversial novel *Chinnamastar Manuhtu* (The Man from Chhinnamasta).' The novel is a critique of the thousand-year-old tradition of animal sacrifice in the famous Hindu Shakti Pitha at Kamakhya: 'She quotes scriptures to authenticate the argument she puts forward in the novel—to worship the Mother Goddess with flowers rather than blood.' *Jatra* (The Journey) is another of her major fictions of this period. It is based on the problem of militancy and secessionism that has been plaguing north-east India right from the time of independence.

Indira Goswami received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1984 and the Jnanpith Award in 2000. Focus on women and the cultural and political framework of Assamese society are two of the main features of Indira's writing. *Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howda* is set in the house of Damodar-iyā Gosain, the *adhikar*, abbot, of a Vaishnava Satra in a village in the southern part of Kamrup district. Indira shows how the religious conservatism of this household thoughtlessly suppresses the human instincts and wishes, especially of women; it has thus

allowed religion to go against humanity. This is highlighted through the sad experiences of Giribala, Gosain's daughter, who is a teenage widow.

Tribal society has always been part of Assamese literature. In his novel *Rongmilir Hanhi* (Rongmili's Smile), the reputed Karbi writer and present president of Asom Sahitya Sabha, Rong Bong Terang, brought Karbi society into limelight in mainstream Assamese literature. The events of the novel are woven elegantly around the social life of the Karbis, their religious festivals, rites, and rituals. The social festivals of the Karbis are interrelated with their traditional beliefs and religious sentiments. The author depicts with sensitivity how with the coming of the British missionaries and the spread of Christianity Karbi society also began to change gradually. Another important work on similar lines is that of Yeshe Dorje Thongchi, a senior administrative officer of Arunachal Pradesh, who has enriched As-

samese literature with his works highlighting the lives of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Rita Choudhury's *Deou Langkhui* (The Divine Sword) is another recent work based on the life and history of the Tiwas, a scheduled tribe of Assam.

Contemporary Assamese literature cannot be said to have a single common vision or belong to a particular school. The ready availability of newly published works from around the world, the phenomenal growth of electronic technology and mass media, and easy access to travel

and study across the world have all influenced Assamese writers in various ways. Furthermore, present-day writers are generally swayed by recent political upheavals in the country and the state, disintegration of public morals, and economic progress. Thus, Assamese literature today reflects and focuses more on the immediate and shifting trends of modern life than on eternal verities.



Kamakhya Temple, Guwahati

Modern Marathi Literature: Its Cultural and Spiritual Roots

Dr N B Patil

HISTORY APPEARS quite close at hand when we think of ancient Vedic India. Here is a society full of vigour in thought and action, bubbling with enthusiasm. The Vedic Period generated a rugged philosophy that sustained India through the subsequent ages. The vigour of Vedic poetry needs to be enjoyed in a tranquil atmosphere. But how did humans arrive at that advanced stage of human contemplation which enables them to apprehend the macroscopic as well as microscopic dimensions of the human personality? In the course of evolution they managed to evolve language—characterized by abstraction, symbolization, and articulation—which would reflect their innermost thoughts and enable them to communicate. Language is a unique human achievement essential to all cultural development.

The *Chhandogya Upanishad* expresses this idea beautifully: ‘*Yad-vai vak nabhavishyati na dharmo nadharmo vyajnapayishyati na satyam nanritam na sadhu nasadhu na hridayajno nahridayajno vag-evaitat-sarvam vijnapayati vacam-upassveti*; had there been no speech, the righteous and the unrighteous would have been dumb and still, truth and untruth, right and wrong might have remained unexpressed, human hearts would have remained unrevealed. It is speech that throws light on everything. Contemplate speech.’

Though the linguistic faculty is innate to humans, language is not; otherwise, the whole of humanity would have been monolingual. Nature has given us the faculty to produce language, and various human groups have been utilizing this faculty in different ways. Hence, the multiplicity of languages across the globe. In India this linguistic variety is

particularly marked. The languages north of the Narmada have their common ancestry in Sanskrit, while those spoken south of the Godavari trace their ancestry to the Dravidian group of languages. But though these languages have different ancestries, they inherit a common national culture.

A living nation breathes its own culture, which is vital for its existence. A nation delinked from its culture rarely survives. National culture is comparable to the human backbone—if it is intact, the human being can stand erect and can thrive. As long as a nation’s backbone is strong, it enjoys vigorous health and vitality. It can ascend new heights of glory. In India a strong moral and religious lifestyle based on the understanding of nature, both external and internal, was developed from ancient times. The study of external nature resulted in the growth of various life sciences. The study of internal nature resulted in a vision encompassing the whole of humanity. To the Vedic person the entire universe was a big nest where humanity could reside peacefully, *yatra vishvam bhavati ekanidam*.

The eighth schedule of the Indian constitution has a list of twenty-two scheduled languages spoken widely in different states. Besides, there are hundreds of dialects in use across the country. Each of these nourishes the national life of people in their own regional setting. So far as Maharashtra is concerned, we have the regional variant Marathi, the official language of the state. Yet Marathi is fairly standardized and there is no difficulty in carrying out the state administration in Marathi. Even the judiciary at district level finds it convenient to deliver judgements in Marathi, the official language of the state. This could happen only because the state

has made concerted efforts to develop Marathi language and literature during the last forty years.

Marathi as it is known today is only nine hundred years old. The earliest recorded Marathi writing is an inscription on the colossal Gomateshwara statue at Sravanabelgola, which reads: '*Chamundaraye karaviyale*; constructed by Chamundaraya.' A few earlier inscriptions have also been noticed, but they remain inconclusive. From the eleventh century onwards Marathi was used by all the saints of Maharashtra to develop rapport with common people. Chakradhara, the founder of the Mahanubhava sect, chastised his disciples for writing in Sanskrit. He insisted that his teachings be broadcast in the language of the common people. The bhakti movement was nourished in Marathi, and this helped integrate society and make it strong enough to bear the brunt of foreign aggression. There is also a large-scale seepage of cultural ethics into modern Marathi literature as a result of the work of these saints.

The saints of Maharashtra elaborated upon the philosophy and ethics of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. These epics, together with the Puranas, in turn elucidate the teachings of the Vedas and Upanishads. The saints, with their love for God and concern for common people, laid the norms of pious and ethical living. This also helped integrate society and advanced its efforts for independence from Mughal domination. The masses found their leader in Shivaji. It was through stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, as well as the *abhangas* and *ovis* of saints, that his mother Jijabai inculcated in Shivaji the sterling qualities of leadership and governance. Shivaji succeeded in emancipating the masses from the tyranny of the then rulers and gave them political independence. Although he did not live long after his coronation, Shivaji created a sense of self-confidence among his nobles and warriors, and their combat skill and military power remained dominant for the next hundred years.

With the advent of the British in the seventeenth century, first as traders and later as overlords,

the Maharashtra society looked forward to the language of the rulers for sustenance. By the mid-nineteenth century the British had brought most of India under their sway. They also laid the foundation of modern university education by establishing universities at Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta. By the end of the nineteenth century Marathi was recognized as an indigenous language usable for academic purposes. The introduction of English literature brought about a great change in modern Marathi literature. The liberal thought of English literature was picked up by Marathi writers and this was reflected in Marathi writings of the early twentieth century.

Twentieth-century Developments

Hari Narayan Apte (1864–1919), a representative Marathi writer of the early twentieth century, is known for his short stories and historic novels. His short stories have social themes which depict the emancipation of women from rigid social shackles. He reveals a world of human relationships, which speaks of the immense strength displayed by women in meeting the social situations that come their way. Another writer, Y G Joshi, wrote a number of stories depicting the traditional Marathi culture. All his stories have the touch of the distinct human element that characterizes ancient Indian culture. Bhargavaram Vitthal 'Mama' Warerkar (1883–1964), is another important litterateur of this time. His drama *Sita Swayamvar* (Sita's Marriage) portrays Sita's emotional conflict in a modern setting. Mama Warerkar is known for his translations of Sharatchandra Chatterjee's Bengali novels into Marathi. In their original Bengali, these novels are the finest depictions of the twentieth-century Bengali household, so deeply rooted in traditional culture. At the same time, they sensitively delineate human sentiments, thus showing the refinement of their spiritual heritage.

Marathi culture is also depicted admirably in the novels of Vishnu Sakharam Khandekar (1898–1976). Both Khandekar and Narayan Sitaram Phadke (1894–1978) made major contributions to

modern Marathi literature. But while Khandekar's novels, such as *Yayati*, reflect a deep inheritance of spiritual and cultural traditions, it is not so with Phadke's fiction. In consequence, people have almost forgotten Phadke the novelist while they still read and enjoy Khandekar's works. Khandekar was the first Marathi author to receive the Jnanpith Award, and his novels have been extensively translated into Kannada, Tamil, and Gujarati.

B R Tambe (1874–1941) is another great Marathi poet who has sustained the love of poetry among Maharashtrians. His poems have various moods and a deep emotional ring. Marathi-speaking people of my generation have been greatly inspired by this poetry. His 'Rudra' is a vigorous piece of poetry invoking heroism. I remember our college principal getting us to sing this poem in chorus during the border hostilities of the mid-sixties. Poetry that evokes heroism among youth is a national heritage and should never be forgotten.

The history of Marathi literature will not be complete unless we take into consideration the contributions of Pandurang Sadashiv Sane (1899–1950), popularly known as Sane Guruji. He was a teacher and also a faithful follower of Mahatma Gandhi. His writings are imbued with a nationalist spirit. His *Shyamchi Aai* (Shyam's Mother) is a best-seller. The book contains memoirs of his childhood woven around his mother. That the mother's role is crucial in the formation of the psyche and the spiritual personality of the adult is brought out very insightfully in this novel. Mothers with little or no formal education can shape their children into strong and righteous youths. This is what Shyam's mother did. She had inherited the spoken literature of the saints. She would sing the *ovis* and *abhangas* of Marathi poets on the grinding wheel and Shyam would listen and enjoy the melody, absorbing thus the ancient wisdom. This enriched his inner life. His dedication to the cause of freedom and upliftment of the masses is now part of the history of India's freedom struggle.

In the 1950s Acharya Prahlad Keshav Atre (1898–1969), a popular and versatile Marathi author, ren-

dered *Shyamchi Aai* into a film that turned out to be very popular throughout Maharashtra as well as outside and also received the President's award. Sane Guruji was the first to translate *Tirukkural*, a Tamil text on ethics of great antiquity, into Marathi. He had sponsored the Bhasha Bharati movement that wanted various linguistic groups to come together and work for the development of all Indian languages.

The Sants and Social Writers

The poet Dilip Chitre (1938–2009) has presented the notable Maharashtrian saint Tukaram to English readers. Sant Tukaram had the intelligence of a common man and a powerful diction. Next to those of Sant Jnaneshwar, Sant Tukaram's works are probably the most widely read devotional literature across Maharashtra—and now these are also greatly appreciated in regions where Marathi is least spoken. The tradition of religious and social democracy was firmly laid by Sant Chakradhar and Sant Jnaneshwar in the thirteenth century, and Sant Tukaram gave it a fresh impetus in the seventeenth.

Another saint who has left his mark on the Marathi mind is Samarth Ramdas, an ardent devotee of Sri Rama. He promoted the worship of Hanuman—a symbol of self-control, service, sacrifice, and power—by having temples dedicated to this deity built in virtually every village of Maharashtra. He inspired people to undertake self-governance and infused them with the love of motherland. Shivaji, the heroic seventeenth-century ruler of Maharashtra, owes much to the teachings of Tukaram and Ramdas.

S M Mate (1886–1957) and G B Sardar of Pune wrote extensively about the social handicaps of the depressed classes. Both were exposed to Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature in their youth and this gave their writings an edge of social reform. Both eschewed politics and strove for social uplift. Gopal Nilkanth Dandekar (1916–98) is another notable and widely read Marathi writer. In his early youth, Dandekar circumambulated the great River

Sant Gadge Baba

Debuji Zingraji Janorkar was born in the family of village washermen on 23 February 1876. He lost his father when he was just eight. His mother moved to her brother's house with her son, and both mother and son had to lead a very hard life. Debu grazed the village cattle and worked hard in the fields belonging to his maternal uncle. After the death of his uncle, the village moneylender grabbed his uncle's land, although the loan drawn by his uncle had been duly repaid along with all the accrued interest. Debu left home and wandered from village to village observing the poverty and indebtedness of the village people.

He swept and sanitized villages and talked to the people in the evenings. He pleaded with his village audience for cleanliness and sanitation and for the education of their children. Eventually, Gadge Baba, as he was called—because of the broken earthen water pot he always carried, often worn upturned on his head—became a great social force that changed the lives of village folk. His message is encapsulated in the following ten-point programme:

- Food to the Hungry
- Clean water to the thirsty
- Clothing for the poor
- Schooling for poor village boys
- Shelter for the disabled
- Treatment for the sick
- Employment for the poor
- Kind treatment of draught animals
- Encouragement for young men and women
- Hope for the desolate

He exhorted: 'Educate your children; starve yourself if necessary, but see that your children are properly educated.' That was the work of his lifetime and his ever-assuring message.



Narmada barefoot. Later, he spent a number of years in the company of the great saint Gadge Baba (1876–1956) and participated in his philanthropic activities. Gadge Baba was a peripatetic sadhu and Dandekar lived with him as his helpmate and companion for over a decade. Gadge Baba had no disciples. He would go from village to village, cleaning the grounds, river banks, and water tanks—so that people and their livestock could get safe drinking water—roads, and gutters. He rebuked villagers for not sending their children to school and for lavishly spending in marriages even at the cost of incurring debts. Thus, in the company of Gadge Baba, Dandekar had an education that sustained him throughout life. He studied *Jñaneshwari* and

Tukaram Gatha. This enriched his language and style. Later he went round the various historical forts of Maharashtra, alone or in the company of youth groups, writing about them extensively.

Marathi literature is rich in fiction, especially novels and short stories. The earliest Marathi novel is *Yamuna Paryatana* (Travels by the Yamuna) by Baba Padmanji (1831–1906), and the first Marathi drama *Sita Swayamvar* (Sita's Self-choice) is by Vishnudas Bhawe (d.1901). These were composed in the mid-nineteenth century. Both these genres developed in the course of the next few decades, and by the mid-twentieth century Marathi had a number of novelists and story writers.

Dwarkanath Madhav Pithale 'Nath Madhav'

(1882–1928) wrote historical and social novels, ‘the latter dealing with encouragement of women’s education and remarriages of widows, condemnation of the abhorrent practice of arranged marriages of children with adults, and similar social issues of his times’; Narayan Hari Apte (1889–1971) focused on ‘ways to experiencing happy family life’; V V Bokil (1903–73) introduced humour as well as pathos in the Marathi novel; Malati Bedekar ‘Vibhavari Shirurkar’ (1905–2001) dwelt on feminist issues; Gajanan Tryambak Madkholkar (1900–76) wrote political fiction; Vaman Malhar Joshi (1882–1943) preached a progressive social philosophy; and P B Bhave (1910–80) explored the emotional and moral significance of human life. The historical novels of Ranjit Desai (1928–92) and N S Inamdar (1923–2010), the existentialist writings of T V Sardeshmukh and Bhalchandra Nemade (b.1938), Jayawant Dalvi’s (1925–94) humour as well as description of impressions of complex experiences lying deep within the human mind, and Madhu Mangesh Karnik’s (b.1931) realistic portrayal of dalits and fringe groups have left a significant impression on contemporary Marathi thought. Marathi drama has been enriched by the musical plays of Vishnu Vaman Shirwadkar ‘Kusumagraj’ (1912–99), Vasant Shankar Kanetkar (1920–2000), and Vidyadhar Gokhale (1924–96). S N Navare (b.1927) and Vijay Tendulkar (1928–2008) are two of the other contemporary dramatists that have had a serious impact on the Marathi stage. Most of these writers are trend setters in Marathi fiction. A new generation of writers is coming up and Marathi drama has a bright future.

It was not my intention to give a resume of Marathi literature here; I have only mentioned some salient features that strongly reflect its Indian ethos. The human mind, with its deep seated emotions of love and kindness, is the perennial source of literature. History is woven through literature. The literature that reflects a nation’s spiritual inheritance can live long and sustain the culture of the land. It is suicidal to forget one’s cultural heritage. India has a bright future because she has a glorious spiritual heritage to draw upon. It is worthwhile to study the

regional literature of India and to find out to what extent it reflects the cultural ethos of this ancient land. If it does, then the regional literature will stay alive for long, otherwise it will die in its own land. As we see positive thoughts being reflected in modern Marathi literature, we can foresee that its cultural roots will continue to spread in postmodern times.

PB

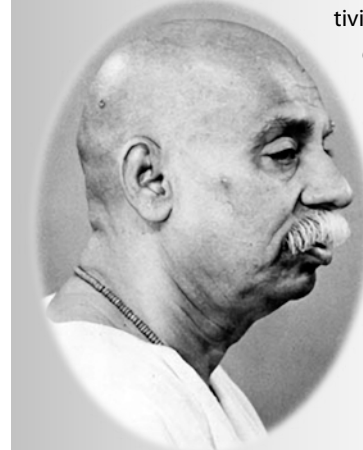
Sant Tukdoji Maharaj (1909–68)

Born of Bandoji and Manjula, in the village Yavali of Amravati district, and christened Manik, Tukdoji Maharaj neglected school and studies and followed an unlettered mystic, Sant Adkoji Maharaj of Warkhed. This led to the boy’s spiritual unfoldment, and he also started showing signs of being a gifted poet. He learnt to play rhythmically on the *khanjiri*, tambourine. He adapted popular film tunes to his devotional lyrics. Now called Tukadyadas—as he signed off each of his bhajans with the refrain ‘*tukadya kahe*, Tukadya says’—Manik travelled widely and his Hindi bhajans became very popular throughout North India. He played a crucial role in the Quit India movement by activating the masses with his heroic bhajans.

Tukdoji Maharaj set up an organization called Sri Gurudev Seva Mandal with its headquarters at Mozari—now called Gurukunj. Volunteers of this organization are found all over Maharashtra and even outside. They organize evening prayers and spread the message of religious harmony. They

also undertake village uplift activities based on the *Grama*

Gita, Tukdoji Maharaj’s magnum opus. The message of right living is traceable on every page of this text. Recently, the Amravati and Nagpur Universities have been renamed after Sant Gadge Baba and Sant Tukdoji Maharaj.



The Blustering Bully

N Hariharan

PLAYING THE SEDULOUS APE might be a delectable pastime to start with but, as the game advances, it invariably proves a costly misadventure, reducing in the process the aping fool to a laughing stock. The erosion of prestige and self-respect he suffers is all the more serious if he is least qualified to do the aping. The ludicrous plight of a presumptuous ape is dramatically illustrated by a Tamil verse employing a forceful analogy. The scene the verse conjures up runs on the following lines.

It is a lovely pleasance in which a variety of birds twitter in high merriment. The sky darkens and rain-bearing clouds scurry across the sky, bringing welcome showers. A proud peacock, strutting gracefully, spreads its colourful plumes and breaks into an exquisite caper, its rhythmic dance is a sight for the gods. Suddenly, an uncouth turkey presumes to challenge the peacock in a dancing match. He throws open his stale and stunted tail and waddles gracelessly back and forth. The dancing peacock draws warm applause from the spectators, but the ungainly turkey is booed and heckled and, crestfallen, beats a hasty retreat, fearing a volley of missiles from the irate onlookers.

*Kana mayilada kandiruntha vankozhi
tanum athuvaka bhavithu
Tan polla chiragai virithadinarpolum
kallatan katra kavi.*

Espying a peacock merrily dance
Pretentious turkey breaks into a prance,
And unfurls his uncouth wings—
Such are the lyrics the unlearned sings!

The likes of the pretentious turkey abound everywhere. Even in the Bhagavata we find the fatuous turkey. Krishna, the Divine, is the Bhagavata's peacock, romantic and resourceful. His di-

vine personage, with four arms bearing such diverse paraphernalia as the conch, discus, and mace, clad in glittering yellow silks, wearing the Kaustubha jewel, sporting the Srivatsa mark on his chest and the bright-coloured Vijayanti garland round his neck—that bewitching embodiment of distilled beauty is symbolized by the outspread plumes of the peacock, the moon-shaped, circular splash of glossy blue dappled with a constellation of dark-blue eyes. The peacock's graceful dance, a poem in jocund motion, represents Krishna in divine action—the saga of his exploits and stunning feats of heroism and ingenuity and righteous exertions. To a discerning mind, the profile of a dancing peacock epitomizes the divine charm of Krishna bubbling through each and every aspect of his demeanour and deportment.

If Krishna is the peacock, who, then, is the turkey of the Bhagavata? Paundraka, ruler of Karusha—stupid, vain, and blustering. Sri Shuka, rightly calling him *alpa-medhas*, scanty of intelligence, recounts the story of Paundraka's foolhardy bid to impersonate the Lord and press his claims to divinity, eating, in the process, humble pie.

Vanity and Pretence

Paundraka is a cantankerous boor in whom the fire of malice and envy towards Krishna smoulders stubbornly. He cannot bear the sight of Krishna's divine splendour—his opulence, resplendent regalia, invincible weapons, and gorgeous accoutrements. Itching for a showdown with the Lord, he sends an emissary to Krishna with an audacious message. The emissary reaches Dwaraka and, in an open assembly, delivers Paundraka's message to the Lord: 'I am the sole person incarnated, out of compassion for beings, as Vasudeva. There is none else

who can call himself Vasudeva. Give up your appellation of Vasudeva. Discard immediately whatever emblems of mine you wear out of your impudence. Hasten and surrender to me. If you don't yield to my demands, then give me battle.' Vastly amused by Paundraka's effrontery and the peremptory tone of his nonsensical prattle, the assembly's members greet the message with a derisive guffaw.

Krishna decides that the time has come to cure Paundraka of his dangerous lunacy and shatter the illusion he labours under. He promptly dispatches a reply marked by firmness of resolve and finality of purpose: 'I shall certainly release the discus and other weapons that you ask me to give up, but that would be against you and your friends who speak so senselessly of battle.' He then sets out to battle Paundraka, equipped with his distinctive paraphernalia and wearing his unique raiment, ornaments, and garlands. These exquisite paraphernalia are a perfect fit, gloriously adorning his holy person; they are, so to say, as natural and pleasing as the colourful plumage of the peacock.

The folly! Paundraka, in a mighty pique and ready for a fight, confronts Krishna not in martial uniform, armoured and wearing a coat of mail, but as a pathetic counterfeit, clothed in the Lord's distinctive garments and ornaments, wielding his celebrated weapons, and sporting the flag embossed with the emblem of Garuda. This indecorous imitation renders Paundraka as ludicrous as a turkey stretching out its shabby quills, attempting to ape the bright-plumed peacock. The extraordinary ensigns that sparkle so beautifully on Krishna's form offend the eyes when arrogated by Paundraka. Krishna's arms and apparel glow on his body. On Paundraka the same trappings, so odd and out of place, make for an unseemly, glaring incongruity. Paundraka looks like a scarecrow decked in fabulous duds, or a bejewelled corpse strutting about in bright attire. Ranging himself on the battlefield, flaunting fraudulently Krishna's characteristic mantle, Paundraka ventures to establish that he is the real Vasudeva and Krishna the vile pretender.

Paundraka's allies rally swiftly to his support with their regiments; the King of Kashi, a staunch confederate, sallies forth with his forces to protect him in the rear.

Krishna sees Paundraka posing as Vasudeva on the battlefield, and is more amused than angered by this comic figure, looking like an actor come to the stage to play his part. Presently, the battle erupts. The Bhagavata declares that the first salvo is fired by Paundraka and, therefore, the blame for starting the war should be laid squarely at his door. It says, 'The enemies attacked Hari with tridents, spears, maces, pestles, javelins, and arrows.' Sri Shuka paints Paundraka as not only an unabashed usurper but also a war maniac, the type who resort to arms without any rhyme or reason. The weapons Paundraka employs are mighty and manifold. Even as the grim battle furiously unfolds and the air is thick with the fusillade of fiery missiles, Krishna issues an ultimatum: that Paundraka give up his weapons and false claims to the title of Vasudeva or prepare for death by mortal attack. Paundraka persists in his defiance; so Krishna deprives him of his chariot and beheads him. Paundraka's lieutenants are routed and the king of Kashi is also slain. Krishna returns victorious to Dwaraka, leaving his opponents to their ignominious defeat. But the Lord is not merely the punisher of the wicked, he is their redeemer too. Paundraka, who was ever obsessed with Krishna—albeit in a mood of extreme envy and malice—attained the state of absorption into the Lord on his death.

Anger and Delusion

Sudakshina, son of the King of Kashi, is infuriated by Krishna's killing of his father. After completing his father's obsequies he engages himself in a severe penance to propitiate Lord Shiva for a boon. Shiva, of course, is immensely pleased with anyone undertaking penance and he soon offers to grant Sudakshina the boon of his choice. Sudakshina asks for the means to kill Krishna, the slayer of his father. Shiva cannot go back on

his word. He instructs Sudakshina in the use of black magic, teaching him a sacrifice involving the Dakshinagni fire which would carry out the sacrificant's wishes, provided it was not directed against a holy person.

Even as the sacrifice is on, the god of fire, assuming a terror-inspiring form, emerges from the fire-altar and races towards Dwaraka, surrounded by hosts of goblins, shaking the earth with each tread. The inhabitants of Dwaraka, witnessing the fast-approaching fire of black magic, are struck with panic. They take refuge in Krishna, who is engrossed in a game of dice in his assembly. With a laugh, Krishna assures his subjects of his help and dispels their fears. The omniscient Lord—the witness of everything within and without—immediately realizes that this is the handiwork of Lord Shiva's forces, and promptly sets about the task of counteracting the menace posed by the blazing fire. He dispatches his unfailing discus, which shines with the lustre of a million suns, has the effulgence of the fire of dissolution, and lights up all the worlds with its brilliance. The invincible Sudarshana Chakra dwarfs the scorching heat of the fire of black magic by its luminous splendour and harries it with its force. The diabolic fire, unable to withstand Sudarshana's fiery onslaught, beats a retreat. Ruthless in its workings, and bound to return to its author and exact its heavy toll, the fire of black magic returns hastily to Kashi and incinerates Sudakshina and his cohorts. Following the fire, the divine discus Sudarshana, reduces the city of Kasi to a rubble of roasted remains and then returns to the Lord and stations itself by his side.

The story of Paundraka with its spicy flavour of fun, fatuity, and fierceness is certainly fascinating, though it does turn gruesome in some of its details. But when the story is subjected to allegorical interpretation, it proves to be quite instructive and profound.

The Self and the Ego

Lord Krishna, with his distinctive insignia and

unique weapons, symbolizes the Atman, the Self, defined as Sat-chit-ananda, Existence-Consciousness-Bliss: it is of the very nature of imperishability, immutability, luminosity, and unalloyed bliss. Paundraka, the arch-hypocrite flaunting the apparel and arms of Krishna, represents *ahamkara*, egoism: essentially hollow but audacious enough to pose as the plenary Self and affect its intrinsic qualities. This classic encounter between the Self and the pseudo-self is invariably experienced by each and every spiritual aspirant during sadhana.

In attempting to dethrone the Self, egoism mobilizes its resources—the triad of *gunas*, represented by the King of Kashi, and *avidya*, primal nescience, represented by the other allies of Paundraka in the war. In steadfast and vigilant sadhana, egoism is ultimately conquered and the Self reigns supreme. Egoism's final annihilation and the enthronement of the Self are illustrated by Krishna's killing of Paundraka. The killing of the King of Kashi, Paundraka's committed ally in his crazy expedition, implies the liquidation, under the impact of the blazing Self-vision, of the triad of *gunas*—that sturdy prop to egoism and its egregious pretensions. It would seem, however, that the death of egoism and the triad of *gunas* are not accepted as final and irrevocable by *avidya*, which tries to reverse their extinction. *Avidya*'s last-ditch effort to avenge the killings of its progeny—the *gunas* and egoism—and, if possible, to revive them, is illustrated by Sudakshina's resort to black magic in his attack against Krishna. Such are the insidious workings of maya to frustrate the dawn of the Self-vision, the saving wisdom. True to the Lord's description in the Bhagavadgita, 'My maya is difficult to conquer', maya mobilizes its resources of illusion to obstruct the dawn of the Self-vision and perpetuate its own tyranny. The conquest and destruction of black magic by Sudarshana, Krishna's dreaded discus, underscores the spiritual dictum that the flame of Self-vision, once ignited, burns down the trickeries of maya and shines with undimmed splendour.

(Continued on page 357)

The Sacred Concept of Divine Mother Kali

Prof. Arun Kumar Biswas

(Continued from the previous issue)

THE READERS ARE ADVISED to savour in the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* the excellent account of the annual Kali Puja celebration at the Dakshineswar Temple on Saturday, 18 October 1884. The next year, the date of the Kali Puja according to the lunar calendar fell on Friday, 6 November 1885. Sri Ramakrishna had been afflicted with cancer and was staying at Shyampukur, Kolkata, under the treatment of Dr Mahendralal Sarkar. Two books of Kali songs by Ramprasad and Kamalakanta were presented to Dr Sarkar at the Master's request. In the *Gospel* there is an appealing description of the arrangements made in Sri Ramakrishna's room for the Kali Puja of that year:

In the twinkling of an eye Sri Ramakrishna goes into deep samādhi. An amazing transformation takes place in the Master before the very eyes of the devotees. His face shines with a heavenly light. His two hands are raised in the posture of granting boons and giving assurance to the devotees; it is the posture one sees in images of the Divine Mother. ... Is the Divine Mother of the Universe manifesting Herself through his person? Speechless with wonder, the devotees look intently at Sri Ramakrishna, who appears to them to be the embodiment of the Divine Mother Herself.²⁰

Reflections on the Divine Mother

We would now quote Sri Ramakrishna's profound and authoritative reflections on the divinity of Mother Kali, starting with his 'nectar-like words' delivered on 27 October 1882, the day of the Lakshmi Puja. It was a full-moon evening and Sri Ramakrishna, Keshabchandra Sen, and other Brahmo devotees were on a grand steamboat trip from Dakshineswar to Kolkata. The spellbound de-

votees listened to the unceasing words of wisdom flowing from the Master's lips:

The Primordial Power is ever at play. She is creating, preserving, and destroying in play, as it were. This Power is called Kālī. Kālī is verily Brahman, and Brahman is verily Kālī. It is one and the same Reality. When we think of It as inactive, that is to say, not engaged in the acts of creation, preservation, and destruction, then we call It Brahman. But when It engages in these activities, then we call It Kālī or Śakti. The Reality is one and the same; the difference is in name and form. ...

She plays in different ways. It is She alone who is known as Mahā-Kālī, Nitya-Kālī, Śmaśāna-Kālī, Rakshā-Kālī, and Śyāmā-Kālī. Mahā-Kālī and Nitya-Kālī are mentioned in the Tantra philosophy. When there were neither the creation, nor the sun, the moon, the planets, and the earth, and when darkness was enveloped in darkness, then the Mother, the Formless One, Mahā-Kālī, the Great Power, was one with Mahā-Kāla, the Absolute.

Śyāmā-Kālī has a somewhat tender aspect and is worshipped in the Hindu household. She is the Dispenser of boons and the Dispeller of fear. People worship Rakshā-Kālī, the Protectress, in times of epidemic, famine, earthquake, drought, and flood. Śmaśāna-Kālī is the embodiment of the power of destruction. She resides in the cremation ground, surrounded by corpses, jackals, and terrible female spirits. From Her mouth flows a stream of blood, from Her neck hangs a garland of human heads, and around Her waist is a girdle made of human hands.

After the destruction of the universe, at the end of a great cycle, the Divine Mother garners the seeds for the next creation. She is like the elderly mistress of the house, who has a hotchpotch-pot in which she keeps different articles for household use. (*All laugh.*) ...

After the destruction of the universe, my Divine Mother, the Embodiment of Brahman, gathers together the seeds for the next creation. After the creation the Primal Power dwells in the universe itself. She brings forth this phenomenal world and then pervades it. In the Vedas creation is likened to the spider and its web. The spider brings the web out of itself and then remains in it. God is the container of the universe and also what is contained in it.

Is Kālī, my Divine Mother, of a black complexion? She appears black because She is viewed from a distance; but when intimately known She is no longer so. The sky appears blue at a distance; but look at it close by and you will find that it has no colour. The water of the ocean looks blue at a distance, but when you go near and take it in your hand, you find that it is colourless (134–6).

On another occasion Sri Ramakrishna said: ‘Take the image of Śiva and Kālī. Kālī stands on the bosom of Śiva; Śiva lies under Her feet like a corpse; Kālī looks at Śiva. All this denotes the union of Purusha and Prakriti. Purusha is inactive; therefore Śiva lies on the ground like a corpse. Prakriti performs all Her activities in conjunction

with Purusha. Thus She creates, preserves, and destroys. That is also the meaning of the conjoined images of Rādhā and Krishna’ (271).

Sri Ramakrishna went a few steps beyond, identifying Prakriti with Purusha when the latter is active; and Kali with Brahman, in the same vein. He also equated Kali with Krishna, Christ, and Allah. What is more, he fulfilled the historical necessity of refuting the dogmatic iconoclasts of Vedantic Absolutism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Brahmo movement led by Raja Rammohan Roy. Through his inimitable language and metaphors, he established the identity of the infinite forms of God with God’s formlessness:

A man who has seen only one aspect of God limits God to that alone. It is his conviction that God cannot be anything else.

(*To the goswāmi*) How can you say that the only truth about God is that He has form? It is undoubtedly true that God comes down to earth in a human form, as in the case of Krishna. And it is true as well that God reveals Himself to His devotees in various forms. But it is also true that God is formless; He is the Indivisible Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute. He has been described in the Vedas both as formless and as endowed with form. He is also described there both as attributeless and as endowed with attributes.

Do you know what I mean? Satchidānanda is like an infinite ocean. Intense cold freezes the water into ice, which floats on the ocean in blocks of various forms. Likewise, through the cooling influence of bhakti, one sees forms of God in the Ocean of the Absolute. These forms are meant for the bhaktas, the lovers of God. But when the Sun of Knowledge rises, the ice melts; it becomes the same water it was before. Water above and water below, everywhere nothing but water. Therefore a prayer in the *Bhāgavata* says: ‘O Lord, Thou hast form, and Thou art also formless. Thou walkest before us, O Lord, in the shape of a man; again, Thou hast been described in the Vedas as beyond words and thought’.

But you may say that for certain devotees God assumes eternal forms. There are places in the ocean where the ice doesn’t melt at all. It assumes the form of quartz (191).

Picture of Mother Kali at Udbodhan, Kolkata



Mahendranath Gupta, the chronicler of the *Gospel*, heard and recorded this deliberation from the Master during his birthday celebration on 11 March 1883. Eventually, he expressed difficulty in understanding well what was meant by the eternal form of God, *nitya sākār*, and by ‘the form of quartz’, *sphatiker ākār*.²¹ Mahendranath had himself recorded on 28 October 1882 similar statements from the Master: ‘Through the cooling influence, as it were, of the bhakta’s love, the water has frozen at places into blocks of ice. In other words, God now and then assumes various forms for His lovers and reveals Himself to them as a Person’ (148). Just as God has created human-kind, the human mind has also ‘created’ the special forms of God, who, in turn, assumes these forms out of love and compassion for the devotee. If the devotee opts for the coolness of bhakti and shuns the sun of jnana, then ‘the ice never melts’. As a matter of fact, the metaphor jumps from ice to quartz, a solid with a high melting point and a precise crystallographic form!

When Mahendranath visited Sri Ramakrishna for the third time, he was still a Brahmo worshipper of the formless God. That day he had his first, and happily for him his last, argument with the Master. He told the Master that God ‘is not the clay image’ and that this truth should be explained to ‘those who worship the clay image’. The Master administered a stiff rebuke to the iconoclasts of all time through his would-be disciple, ridiculing the ‘hobby’ of giving lectures by those who themselves are ignorant, yet to receive spiritual light! ‘Suppose there is an error in worshipping the clay image,’ the Master said, ‘doesn’t God know that through it He alone is being invoked? He will be pleased with that very worship. Why should you get a headache over it? You had better try for knowledge and devotion yourself’ (80).

Intoxicated with divine love, Sri Ramakrishna would often burst into the celestial songs of Ramprasad and beckon spiritual aspirants away from the tortuous path of philosophy to the broad avenue of devotion:

Who is there that can understand
what Mother Kālī is?
Even the six darśanas are powerless to reveal Her.

...

The macrocosm and microcosm rest
in the Mother’s womb;
Now do you see how vast it is? (106).

Also:

You are trying to know the nature of God?
He is grasped through ecstatic love
Not through the Vedas, tantras or
the six darśanas
It is in love’s elixir only that He delights.
He it is, says Ramprasad, that whom
I approach as Mother!²²

Pray and Listen to Her Voice

Sri Ramakrishna insisted that it is impossible to know everything about God, the Divine Mother. He asked us to pray and take refuge at her lotus feet:

Who can ever know God? I do not even try. I only call on Him as Mother. Let Mother do whatever She likes. I shall know Her if it is Her will, but I shall be happy to remain ignorant if She wills otherwise. ...

O Mother! O Embodiment of Om! Mother, how many things people say about Thee! But I don’t understand any of them. I don’t know anything, Mother. I have taken refuge at Thy feet. I have sought protection in Thee. O Mother, I pray only that I may have pure love for Thy Lotus Feet, love that seeks no return. And Mother, do not delude me with Thy world-bewitching māyā. I seek Thy protection. I have taken refuge in Thee.²³

The Master exhorts us to cry to the Lord with a yearning heart and assures us that we would certainly see him. He sang:

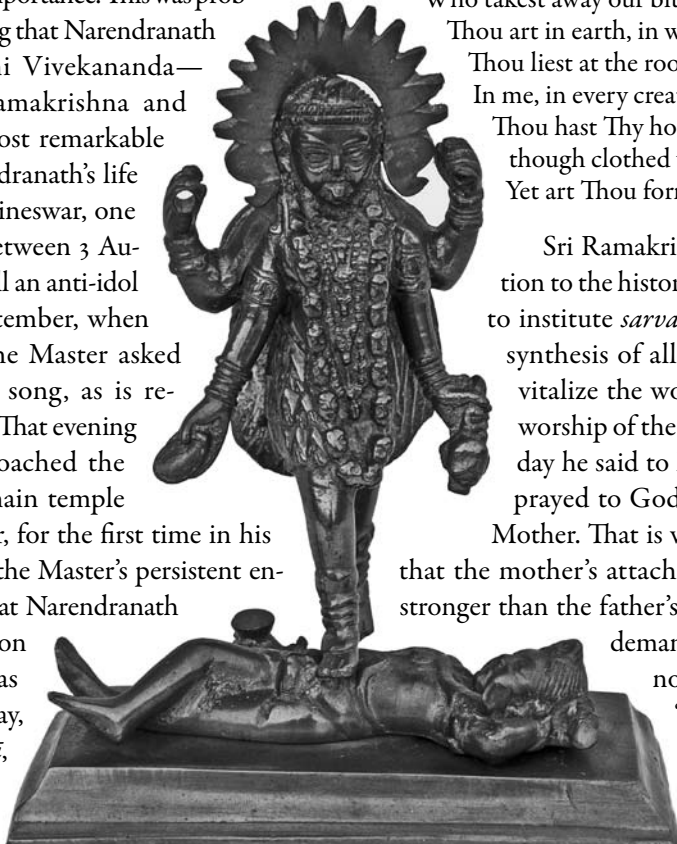
Cry to your Mother Śyāmā with a real cry,
O mind!
And how can She hold Herself from you?
How can Śyāmā stay away?
How can your Mother Kālī hold Herself away?
O mind, if you are in earnest,
bring Her an offering

Of bel-leaves and hibiscus flowers;
Lay at Her feet your offering
And with it mingle the fragrant
sandal-paste of Love (83).

The mystic poet Ramprasad advises us to take the name of Kali and 'let our minds dive deep down, into the heart's fathomless depths, where many a precious (spiritual) gem lies strewn'. Kamalakanta describes 'the black bee of my mind drawn in sheer delight to the blue lotus flower of Mother Shyama's feet'; and then the wonderful vision:

O Kāli, my Mother full of Bliss!
Enchantress of the Almighty Śiva!
In Thy delirious joy Thou dancest,
clapping Thy hands together! ...
Where didst Thou find Thy garland of heads
before the universe was made? (223).

There is one more Kali kirtan, among Sri Ramakrishna's favourites, which has to do with an event of profound historical importance. This was probably the first Kali song that Narendranath Dutta—later Swami Vivekananda—learnt from Sri Ramakrishna and sang. One of the most remarkable transitions in Narendranath's life took place at Dakshineswar, one evening of 1884—between 3 August, when he was still an anti-idol Brahmo, and 6 September, when for the first time the Master asked him to sing a Kali song, as is recorded in the *Gospel*. That evening Narendranath approached the Kali image in the main temple with a fervent prayer, for the first time in his life, and that too at the Master's persistent entreaty. It was then that Narendranath had a wonderful vision of the Mother not as *mṛnmayī*, made of clay, but actually as *cinmayī*, the effulgent light of consciousness.



Years later Swamiji confessed to his disciple Sister Nivedita: 'How I used to hate Kali ... and all Her ways! ... I had great misfortunes at that time ... It was an opportunity. ... She made a slave of me. ... You see, I cannot but believe that there is somewhere a great Power that thinks of Herself as feminine, and called Kali and Mother.'²⁴ The present author has executed a detailed research on this episode²⁵ as well as on Sister Nivedita's lectures on Mother Kali and her debate on Kali worship with Dr Mahendralal Sarkar.²⁶

After obtaining the divine vision, Narendranath requested the Master to teach him how to sing a Kali song. The Master taught him one of his favourite songs, 'Amar Ma Tvam hi Tara', which he learnt and sang throughout the night:

Mother, Thou art our sole Redeemer,
Thou the Support of the three gunas,
Higher than the most high.
Thou art compassionate, I know,
Who takest away our bitter grief. ...
Thou art in earth, in water Thou;
Thou liest at the root of all.
In me, in every creature,
Thou hast Thy home;
though clothed with form,
Yet art Thou formless Reality.²⁷

Sri Ramakrishna's great contribution to the history of religion has been to institute *sarva dharma samanvaya*, synthesis of all religions, and to revitalize the wonderful tradition of worship of the Divine Mother. One day he said to Mahendranath: 'You prayed to God, addressing Him as Mother. That is very good. People say that the mother's attachment to the child is stronger than the father's. A son can force his demand on his mother but not on his father' (634). 'One must worship the Ādyāśakti. ... I worshipped the Shoraśi [in his

own wife, Sri Sarada Devi] as my mother; I looked on all parts of her body as those of my mother. This attitude of regarding God as Mother is the last word in sādhanā. “O God, Thou art my Mother and I am Thy child”—this is the last word in spirituality’ (701). ‘It is God alone who makes people see things in different ways. Know that people have different natures. Realize this and mix with them as much as you can. And love all. But enter your own inner chamber to enjoy peace and bliss.

Lighting the lamp of Knowledge in
the chamber of your heart,
Behold the face of the Mother,
Brahman’s Embodiment’ (637).

Having reached the end of our pilgrimage to the Divine Mother Kali, let us now pray fervently for universal welfare and listen to ‘her voice,’ so movingly and passionately paraphrased by Sister Nivedita:

Think it was for My pleasure thou camest forth into the world, and for that again, when night falls, and My desire is accomplished, I shall withdraw thee to My rest. Ask nothing. Seek nothing. Plan nothing. Let My will flow through thee, as the ocean through an empty shell.

But this thing understand. Not one movement shall be in vain. Not one effort shall fail at last. ...

Religion, called by whatever name, has been ever the love of death. But to-day the flame of renunciation shall be lighted in My lands and consume men with a passion beyond control of thought. Then shall My people thirst for self-sacrifice as others for enjoyment. Then shall labour and suffering and service be counted sweet instead of bitter. For this age is great in time, and I, even I, Kali, am the Mother of the nations. ...


Uproot every interest that would conflict with Mine. Neither love, nor friendship, nor comfort, nor home, may make its voice heard when I speak. Pass from a palace to plunge into the ocean of terror—from the chamber of ease to stand guard in a burning city. Know that as the one is unreal, so also is the other. Meet fate with a smile.

Look for no mercy for thyself, and I shall make thee bearer of great vessels of mercy to others. Accept bravely thine own darkness and thy lamp shall

cheer many. Fulfil gladly the meanest service, and leave high places unsought.

Be steadfast in the toil I set thee. Weave well the warp into the woof. Shrink from no demand that the task makes on thee. Feel no responsibility. Ask for no reward.

Strong, fearless, resolute—when the sun sets, and the game is done, thou shalt know well, little one, that I, Kali, the giver of manhood, the giver of womanhood, and the withholder of victory, am thy Mother.²⁸

Let us pray to the Divine Mother Kali, the Shakti, the active form of the one absolute Brahman. She is the only creator, sustainer, and destroyer of the universe. May she give us the ideal manhood, the ideal womanhood. She commands us to struggle against the external and internal adversaries, to renounce and surrender our selfish instincts, and to sacrifice ourselves at the Dipavali altar of universal love and salvation. Let us pay heed to her voice and fulfil her commandments. 

Notes and References

20. *Gospel*, 928.
21. *Ibid.*, 193. Swami Prabhavananda has provided a slightly different translation in the *Spiritual Heritage of India* (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1977), 344.
22. Translation mine. Sri Ramakrishna also sang these songs on 5 August 1882 when he visited the renowned Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, who had authored for the Asiatic Society, Kolkata, his excellent work *Ṣaḍ-darśana* (The Six Philosophical Treatises).
23. *Gospel*, 299.
24. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 8.263–4; Sister Nivedita, *The Master as I Saw Him* (Kolkata: Udbodhan, 2007), 140–1.
25. Arun Kumar Biswas, *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Janmotsav o Avatar Pujar Adiparva* (Kolkata: Firma KLM, 2003), 108–9.
26. Arun Kumar Biswas, *Gleanings of the Past and the Science Movement: in the Diaries of Drs. Mahendralal and Amritalal Sircar* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 2000), 214–17 and 258–60.
27. *Gospel*, 223–4.
28. Sister Nivedita, *Kali the Mother* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1995), 83–7.



Tantra Today: Blind Spots and Balanced Studies

Dr M Sivaramkrishna

(Continued from the previous issue)

GAVIN FLOOD'S STUDY is based on what he describes as 'en-textualisation of the body', referring thereby to the 'tantric body'. His aim is to steer clear of Indological frames and the values emerging in 'late modernity'. The steering clear is to adopt a hermeneutic loyal to both the native traditions and the outsiders' views. 'More specifically,' he says, 'I wish to understand the tantric body, how the body has been conceptualized by tantric traditions and the use of the body in tantric visions of power and liberation.'³² Flood claims to pursue a holistic paradigm of techniques, representations, and formations, though he still believes that he is faithful to the Indian spiritual tradition and its socio-political ethos. Thus, we have insights into the body as text: as the Vedic body, revelation, and civilization. A more interesting aspect of this work is the coverage of the Pancharatra tradition and its interpretation, mainly as given by Ramanuja. The love between Radha and Krishna is the basic theme of this text. One of its first translations into English was by Swami Vijnanananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna; this translation has recently been reprinted by Parimal.

Full-length studies focusing on the integral links between tantra and yoga continue to appear. The increasing identification of yoga as inherently tantric is one of the noticeable current trends. A very recent example is David Frawley's *Inner Tantric Yoga*. In her introduction to the book, Linda Johnson identifies this study as symptomatic of a new wave in the invasion of the West by yoga. She says that with Swami Vivekananda 'Yoga swept into Western culture in waves'. Then followed the yogic insights of kundalini, chakras, and such other concepts. However, in most popular expectations, all yogas came to focus on a healthy body so that the aspirants were taught to 'count [mantras] as if they were spiritual accountants, or to work with their postures and breath as if yoga was nothing more than a clever way to manipulate the nervous system.'³³

David Frawley's study is an exploration of the next wave. Shakti, he says, 'is an important principle, almost a mantra, which has entered into the new spirituality at a global level, and the worldwide resurgence of the worship of the Goddess'. And 'Shakti is the prime focus of Tan-

tric Yoga, one of India's greatest traditions, which contains a comprehensive worship of the Goddess through beautiful and profound rituals and meditations. Tantra affords us a direct means to access her power and presence through a tradition that has never lost connection to her grace.' But 'Shakti is not simply about sexuality or about the feminine'. It 'relates to all opposites'. It is 'the awesome and cataclysmic powers of the magical Conscious Universe in which we live, on all levels of matter and mind, nature and spirit, the individual and the collective' (xi).

This is a clear and carefully argued study. However, one gets a bit uneasy about this latest trend of focusing on Power, Shakti. Linda Johnson and Gavin Flood mention its manifestation in socio-political dimensions; what then prevents its use as a weapon for global economic and political hegemony, consciously or unconsciously? I suspect this could be a (Freudian?) slip, an extension of what is already evident in the economic sphere of globalization as essentially a paradigmatic continuation of Western hegemony? Traditional Indian scholars of tantra are, in many cases, strict adherents to ethical codes, self-regulatory in their impact. Swami Lakshman Joo is a recent example. Studies coming from the West—especially American university presses—of even figures like Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Aurobindo betray an incredible, and largely incurable, insensitivity to tantric traditions. The power of the Western print media and its vast outreach is too strong to be resisted or reprimanded by the members of the tradition in the developing world. Add to this the blind spots of science in its wilful demolition of almost all traditional forms of faith, and the disturbing power equation could well be the last straw on the camel's back.

In any case, this brings us to the tantric powers manifest as the Dasha-mahavidyas. David Kinsley's study focuses on many aspects, but particularly interesting and insightful are the reflections on the iconography of the goddesses.³⁴ For instance, the motif of awesome skulls and severed heads, though traceable to the decapitation rituals, could essen-

tially be 'symbolic of transformed consciousness', especially when they are ornaments worn by the Mahavidya goddesses.

A comparable volume is June McDaniel's study—which explores the theme of popular goddess worship in West Bengal—entitled, as is to be expected, by a catchy marketable title, as most exotica do: *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls*. McDaniel says that 'a better model for the study of Bengal Shaktism is a triune one rather than a polarity. It consists of folk, tantric and devotional types or strands.' In effect, this would offer a sort of balance to the usual *marga* and *desi*—classical and vernacular—typologies. The folk is 'between the particular and the universal, the villages of "Golden Bengal" and the world outside'.³⁵

Her earlier volume, *The Madness of the Saints*, studies 'the ecstatic religion of Bengal'—the religion of Vaishnavas, Shaktas, Bauls, and holy women. 'The true madman is God,' says a Baul expression. The Bauls present an interesting parallel to the 'tantric body', for, says McDaniel, 'Baul spiritual practice focuses on the body. Without reference to the body, practice is considered irrelevant or imaginary. A Baul proverb states, "What is not in the body (*bhanda*) is not in the universe."' And 'the greatest truth of the body is that it is the dwelling place of the highest being ... as Sri Krishna, the Sai, Alek Nur, or the man of the heart'.³⁶ One recalls Sri Ramakrishna's comment on the *bhagavati tanu*, divine body, with its love eyes. Sri Ramakrishna, of course, was a great lover of Baul tradition and song.

These traditions seem to have an astonishing resilience and vitality, even with the technology and media proliferation that are the order of the day. This is shown in the entrancing narrative by William Dalrymple, described as 'In Search of the Sacred in Modern India', which appeared very recently. The Bauls of Bengal, he says, have 'amassed a treasury of beautifully melancholic and often enigmatic teaching songs, which help map out their path to inner vision. ... For, the Bauls believe that God is found not in a stone or bronze idol or in the

heavens or even in the afterlife, but in the present moment, in the body of the man or woman who seeks the truth.' The tradition is eclectic, 'drawing elements from Sufism, Tantra, Shakta, Sahajia, Vaishnavism and Buddhism.'³⁷ Among the fascinating narratives of the nine lives, two are of particular interest: one with Tarapith as the geographical space—'The Lady Twilight'—and 'The Song of the Blind Minstrel' (204–33; 234–60). Racy narrative rooted in meticulous detail, this book is replete with relevant thematic motifs that are never allowed to become abstractions.

The theme of the 'divine feminine' is crystallized in texts like the *Devi-bhagavata*. Many studies on this work are presently available, but the most comprehensive seems to be the one by C Mackenzie Brown.³⁸ Brown explores the 'tantrification' of scriptures, which is essentially the installation of the Devi as the creator of all gods, indeed, of the entire cosmos. This is seen as an offshoot of the Kali Yuga. Those who are ignorant of this truth have missed perceiving it as, again, the quintessence of the scriptures, the Vedas. The consequence of this is seen, in all its ramifications in the behaviour of the asuras. This, in short, is the meaning of the eternal battle between the mythic gods and asuras, which in our times translate into the forces of destructive knowledge and liberating wisdom. The emergence of this approach to tantric goddesses also accounts for a number of texts extolling her. Brown's edition of the *Devi Gita* is an invaluable addition.³⁹

Another volume worth noting is Devadatta Kali's expository study on *Devi Mahatmya*.⁴⁰ It seems to me the most comprehensive as also reliable textual interpretation of this extremely popular scripture. This is a very helpful edition with various meditations followed by commentary on each aspect or form of the Devi. 'Mine is a commentary,' Devadatta Kali says, 'meant for readers who may have little or no previous knowledge of Indian culture or Hindu thought. It draws broadly on diverse sources of information—religious, philosophical, scientific, or historical—that help to reveal the Devimahatmya's deeper levels of meaning.' Thus,

'on one level' it 'is an allegory of the spiritual journey; on another it is a blueprint of the soul' (31).

Tantra-based studies of women in world religions is a growing branch. Miranda Shaw's study of women in tantric Buddhism is easily one of the most fascinating explorations. Her study, she says, 'challenges the prevailing view of the women of Tantric Buddhism by bringing forth new historical and textual evidence. There is extensive evidence that women participated fully in the emerging Tantric movement.' She sees women represented in this tradition as 'bold, outspoken, independent,' and her study 'advances the idea of cooperative, mutually liberative relationships between men and women.'⁴¹ The insights here need to be extended and applied to other traditions also, though not without spelling out some reservations.

Another genre concerning women and tantra is the narratives of women's experiences of tantra, especially as embodied in goddesses like Kali. Long or short, there are quite a few such studies, and the archetype of Shamanic figures is generally in the background. A good example is Shambhavi Chopra's narrative, highly commended by Professor Lokesh Chandra: 'Shambhavi relives what she has felt over the years, in the blue of the sky, in the enormity of the sacred mountains, in her enlightenment within, in the barefoot light of time.' Moreover, Shambhavi, as David Frawley in his remarks puts it, goes 'directly to the Mother as the source of one's being, as one's closest companion, rather than relying on an intermediary, a form, an idea or a technique.'⁴²

There is certainly an authenticity in the narrative manifested in the evocation of the kundalini as Shakti. The references to Chhinnamasta, one of the forms of the Divine Mother, as 'annihilating all antagonism, hostility, fear and sorrow' opens up what many of us tend to bypass: dismemberment; indeed, all apparent negatives are also aspects of the Mother's manifest energy. Smashana Kali is as much a facet of Sri Ramakrishna's Bhavatarini as Bhadra Kali—recall his vision of Kali as the goddess of creation, sustenance, and destruction. In this genre the Aghora series of narratives stand

apart. They are replete with startling revelations, often too much so for the beginner. For instance, 'Most people will tell you there are six chakras. An Aghora will tell you there are nine', and 'this is not a joking matter'.⁴³

There is also the corpus of poetical compositions praising the Goddess, written by even avowed Advaitins like Acharya Shankara. His *Saundaryalahari* is a prominent example. Besides the exposition by Swami Chandrasekharendra Saraswati, I found the massive and extremely original commentary by Nataraja Guru—illuminating some of the tantric aspects as well as puzzles raised by the text—quite fascinating. Clarifying what the dynamism of tantra involves, he says, 'We have to think mantra, yantra, Tantra at once as presupposing one another, if we are to enter into sympathetic and intuitive understanding of the dynamism that Tantra essentially represents. The dynamism is none other than the mutual participation of yantra on the one side and mantra on the other. Thus, Tantra is the "know-how" or *savoir faire* by which yantra and mantra interact mutually and produce what we call "the fully real experience of unitive understanding"'.⁴⁴

Nataraja Guru sees kama as a link between the outer and inner dimensions of being: 'It is necessary to think of Kama as a mind-born divinity or demiurge who could pass from inner space to outer space, as between the two compartments of an hourglass. In short, the mind-born god does not experience discomfort because eroticism and discomfort cannot go together' (422). *Saundaryalahari* is one of those important texts that are invariably interpreted from the esoteric tantric view, and its verses have acquired the exalted positions of mantras in themselves.

Tantra, Shaivism, Vedanta

I have not covered, even cursorily, the great tradition of Kashmir Shaivism and related tantric doctrines as expounded, notably, by Swami Lakshman Joo and his followers. The outstanding figure here is easily Mark S G Dyczkowski, whose work is rooted in tradition as also in a perceptible inwardness with

it. His expositions of *Vijnana Bhairava* and *Spanda Karika* reflect and balance respect to tradition as also openness to elements that require caution. Moreover, many familiar concepts are clarified by him in a global way. 'Global' is meant to represent the whole tradition, in which the concepts that one wants to explore—and, presumably, experience—are situated. The perception of *matrika* is a case in point. This concept represents the interlinking of the roles played by letters and their embedded energies—analogue to the soul and its associated energy—as Shiva.

But Dyczkowski's outstanding contribution lies in both his work on a less-known tantric text, *Kubjika Tantra*, and his thoroughness in exploring it from new perspectives. Especially significant is his view of kundalini as part of 'the sacred geography' drawing its energy from 'the womb of the cosmic Mother'. He says that 'the matrix of energy can be understood as that of Speech. This universal power through which the cycles of existence are perpetuated consists of the primary energy of the phonemes that together constitute the womb of mantras.' And, mandala-wise, 'laid out in a triangular diagram, called Meru, they are assigned to forty-eight small triangles drawn within the triangle'.⁴⁵ Notwithstanding the erotic symbolism that the explanation of related details involves, this sacred geography is at its best, as a functional tool, in achieving the interiorization of the physical as the metaphysical and psychological.

In explicating the doctrines of Kashmir Shaivism the outstanding contribution of Jaidev Singh and his contemporaries is an enduring resource—authentic and dependable. For tantra studies in general I would like to cite the contributions of Shyam Sundar Goswami, Manoranjan Basu, Gaurinath Sastri, P C Bagchi, and Gopinath Kaviraj as indispensable.

Bettina Baumer's essays in this area are marked by a subtlety and catholicity rare these days. Her essay on *Vijnana Bhairava* attempts 'to present the text from two points of view: an analysis of the language in the context of *sampurna*; and from the point of view of mystical experience'. The Goddess,

in her dialogue with Bhairava, pretends ignorance and passes from feigning 'a state of dissatisfaction, of ignorance, of emptiness to a state of satisfaction, of knowledge, of non-dual fullness'. And thus, 'the way of complete emptying' is the way 'of attaining the form of the void (*sunyata*)'.⁴⁶

This volume, *Void and Fullness*, contains another essay on the same theme—the concept of 'fullness' in Kashmir Shaivism—by Makhan Lal Kokiloo, and an essay by Gopinath Kaviraj translated from Bengali by H N Chakravarty. An important insight related to 'enacting' or 'feigning' is the Indic concept of *lila*, the play of the Mother. Gopinath Kaviraj raises the question of the One becoming many. 'How is this possible?' he asks, and then suggests: 'The reply is that it is the play of the One to become many just as the single moon is reflected in mirrors as a thousand moons. ... The single moon multiplied by the thousand appears as a thousand. When one appears multiplied the infinite one becomes manifest. This is indeed known as the result of *lila*, play.'⁴⁷

Another fascinating essay appears in a massive felicitation volume for Bettina Baumer. This is a study by Annette Wilke on what she calls 'Vedantization of Tantra and "Tantrization" of Advaita Vedanta'.⁴⁸ The focus is *Lalita-trishatibhashya*, the great goddess Lalita Tripurasundari and the doctrine known as Sri Vidya, and the thematic centre is what the author terms the 'Theology of Bliss'. The argument is built, by and large, on interpretation of Vedantic terms as capable of being interpreted in terms of tantra and vice versa. These

include such multivalent concepts as *vimarsha*, innermost awareness, representation, the nature of any manifestation; *prakasha*, direct or undifferentiated manifestation; and *samarasya*, that which is of or expresses the same, similar, equal (*sama*), flavour, juice, or essence (*rasa*) (11).


According to Annette Wilke, the crucial significance of this process lies in the 'transformation of local traditions by the Sankaracharyas. Srividya version is far from being a mere literary *topos*. The Great Goddess theology was an ingenious device to universalize local goddesses and bring them into an orthodox fold ... [and this] does not only belong to the past but also to the present.' Thus, this is a 'missionary device to spread a non-dual, spiritualized Hinduism and to convert wild local goddesses'.⁴⁹ In sum, the theology has a political agenda.

This seems a postmodernist strategy of looking at the margins to marginalize the centres, which in any case cannot hold, both politically and theologically, as W B Yeats prophesied. In a very important sense, this is a relatively nascent approach to religion as a sociological phenomenon. Such approaches extend their insights to everything under the sun. For instance, who could imagine Gandhi being a tantric? But there *is* an attempt, quite interesting in itself, by Nicholas F Gier to present him as one.⁵⁰

But the Goddess persists in relating herself to Sri Ramakrishna, the Great Master of *samarasya*. One of the most important texts of *Rudrayamala Tantra* entitled *Bhavani-nama-sahasra-stuti*, has been translated by Jankinath Kaul



'Kamal' and published by the Srinagar centre of the Ramakrishna Order. Another text by the same translator and publisher is *Panchastavi*, one of the most important works on kundalini yoga. This has a very valuable introduction by M P Pandit, himself a great exponent of tantra.

Let us conclude these random reflections with another link: If Sir John Woodroffe is the pioneer of tantric studies, he has quite a few connections with the Ramakrishna tradition and specifically with *Prabuddha Bharata*! In her meticulous biography, Kathleen Taylor notes that in choosing the term 'tantra' 'Arthur Avalon set out his reasons in two articles published in *Prabuddha Bharata*, a journal of the Ramakrishna Mission and therefore aimed at readers influenced by neo-Vedanta of Vivekananda: "What are the Tantras?" was followed by "The Significance of the Tantras" and they were amalgamated into a single chapter in his book *Shakti and Shakta*."⁵¹ Woodroffe also gave lectures at the Vivekananda Society, Calcutta. Tantra has come a full circle, and it cannot have a more fitting finale! 

Notes and References

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40. *Devimahatmyam: In Praise of the Goddess*, trans. and comm. Devadatta Kali (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2006).
41. Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1998), 4.
42. Shambhavi L Chopra, *Yogic Secrets of the Dark Goddess* (New Delhi: Wisdom Tree, 2007), xxiii, xv, 159. There is also a full-length study by Elisabeth Anne Benard: *Chinnamasta* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994).
43. I could lay my hands on three: *Aghora, At the Left Hand of God* (Aghora I), *Kundalini* (Aghora II), and *The Law of Karma* (Aghora III) (Delhi: Rupa, 1986; 1993; 1998), all by Robert Svoboda. See especially *Kundalini*, 67.
44. *Saundaryalahari*, trans. and comm. Nataraja Guru (New Delhi: D K Printworld, 2005), 11.
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47. Gopinath Kaviraj, 'Gopinath Kaviraj on *Purna*', trans. H N Chakravarty, *Void and Fullness: In the Buddhist, Hindu and Christian Traditions*, 242.
48. Annette Wilke, 'A New Theology of Bliss' in *Samarasya: Studies in Indian Arts, Philosophy and Interreligious Dialogue: In Honour of Bettina Baumer*, eds Sadananda Das and Ernst Furlinger (New Delhi: D K Printworld, 2005), 160.
49. *Ibid.*, 174. An incisive account of great comparable interest is the chapter entitled 'The Goddess and Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives' in Kathleen M Erndl, *Victory to the Mother: The Hindu Goddess of Northwest India in Myth, Ritual and Symbol* (New York: Oxford, 1993), 135–52.
50. Nicholas G Gier, 'Was Gandhi a Tantric?' *Gandhi Marg* (New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, 2007), 21–36.
51. Kathleen Taylor, *Sir John Woodroffe, Tantra in Bengal: An Indian Soul in a European Body?* (Richmond: Curzon, 2001), 155. See also *Prabuddha Bharata*, 22/3 (March 1917), 39.



Lead Us from Darkness to Light!

Arnab Ganguly

Lakshman Jhula
across the Ganga, Rishikesh

THE SETTING SUN WAS AGLOW over the bustling Rishikesh town on the other side of the river. The numerous ashramas and temples dotting both sides of the Ganga were getting ready for their traditional Ganga Arati. The air was filled with the chirping of thousands of feathered friends gathered for their evening ablutions on the stretch of forest land sloping down to the river. Another day was slowly but inexorably passing into history. The mood was sublime all around. The man we went to meet was sitting on a straight-back wooden chair in the porch of his small compact one-room cottage which a generous neighbouring ashrama had built for him on their land next to the famous Rajaji National Park. He appeared blissfully oblivious to his surroundings, lost as he was in his thoughts.

My wife and I had gone to Rishikesh, way back in November 2001, to enjoy a quiet holiday and to soak in the uplifting ambience of this timeless place by the side of the Ganga. A kind soul had arranged for our accommodation in the Gita Bhavan in Swargashram. Everything was just what the doctor had prescribed. We would go out for a stroll along the banks of the river every evening. One day someone suggested that we go and meet an interesting person close by. And that was how we came across this charming man. Maybe our vibes were matching, but whatever the reason, we hit it off wonderfully from the very first day.

What was it about him that captivated us from

our very first contact? He was a dark bearded man in his early forties. Seated on a chair, gazing with a far-away look at the sun setting over the gurgling waters of the Ganga, he had an easy smile playing on his serene face. There was nothing remarkable about the features except for his dancing, mesmerizing eyes. They seemed to say that here was a man who had been to hell and back—a winner. The dark shawl closely wrapped around his stocky frame gave not the least hint of the physical legacy bearing the harrowing experiences of his life. Yes, it was a fascinating encounter.

The initial introduction soon gave way to animated discussions on myriad topics, ranging from the temporal to the spiritual, making us feel as though we had bumped into a long-lost buddy by chance. The evening passed into night without our being even slightly aware of the passage of time, until our friend who brought us there whispered gently into our ears that it was nearly past dinner time and that we must rush back. It only served to whet our appetite for more, and the next day saw us back in the captivating company of our bearded friend. At our gentle prodding, he slowly unfolded the unforgettable story of his life.

We are all familiar with the worn-out cliché: every cloud has a silver lining. But the poignancy of this statement struck us in the face when we heard of the travails of his life. It is the tale of an upwardly mobile young man who had everything in life—a solid middle-class upbringing, good education, a

lovely family, and a great future to look forward to as an IT specialist with a well-known multinational company in Bengaluru, his home town.

The man used to love the good life and, like many of his ilk, had just a nodding acquaintance with matters spiritual. He was quite content leading the typical life of a fun-loving, successful executive. The world, our friend thought, was his oyster. But karma had other plans for him. A terrible car accident left his wife and two children dead, and he was left hanging on to his dear life by a slender thread. After anxious days in coma on a hospital bed, he regained consciousness to learn that the life he knew to be his own no longer existed. His family was gone, and the severe head injury he suffered left him permanently paralysed on his left side. In the twinkling of an eye his whole world came crumbling down in one cruel, numbing blow of fate. His odyssey had just begun.

After spending more than six months in hospital, he returned to an empty home, mentally and physically crippled. With no job and the vital cushion of his loving family gone for ever—his parents had passed away earlier—he had a harrowing time adjusting to his new situation. Driven to utter despair by his physical disability and the terrible loss of his loved ones, he decided one morning to leave everything behind and head for the unknown. He withdrew some money from his bank account, gathered a few clothes and his crutch, and made his way to the nearest railway station with no plans whatsoever, except for a morbid craving to end his life as a welcome release from his apparently insurmountable woes.

The tortuous journey, which took him to many places in the country, found him one day penniless on the dusty streets of Kurukshetra. He barely survived the first few days on alms from passers-by till he was noticed by the head of a local math, lying by the roadside, nearly half dead. The mahant had him brought over to his math and arranged for him to be properly fed and clothed. By then his initial angst had cooled somewhat and, at the request of the mahant, he agreed to stay on to look after the math administration in exchange for free board

and lodging. Slowly, the angry dark clouds began to recede. His dependence on Providence grew daily because it was tested daily. He was slowly beginning to enjoy catching the divine play in everything around him. However, he soon rebelled at the thought of getting ensnared again in the humdrum of the cushy life of a math and without batting an eyelid took to the anonymity of the country roads.

In Rishikesh, while crossing over to Swargashram on the other side of Ram Jhula, he dropped into the rushing Ganga below his small bundle of meagre belongings. It was perhaps symbolic of his burning desire to cut the umbilical cord to his unhappy past and start afresh. He found a spot under a pipal tree by the side of the river at the southern edge of Swargashram and made it his home. There he spent many months at the complete mercy of nature, with wild elephants and deadly snakes as his friends. By the time our paths crossed, he had seemingly found himself at peace with himself, happily surrendering everything and finding refuge at the feet of the Divine Mother. The old gnawing fire inside him had been doused with the waters of the Ganga.

He told how one night he found something like a rope, cold to the touch, lying coiled at his feet under the blanket. Probing tentatively he found it to be a full-grown cobra. Thinking the Lord had at last sent him his messenger of death in the shape of a snake, he poked it with his feet, as if goading it to strike him in retaliation. But God had other plans. The cobra meekly went away that night, though it soon came back to become a fast friend of his.

Our holiday, which all of a sudden had taken a different dimension, soon came to an end, and with a heavy heart we parted the evening before we left for Delhi, en route to Kolkata, weaving plans for a reunion next year. But it was not to be. Soon arrived the news from Rishikesh that our friend from Bengaluru had left without a trace, maybe in pursuit of greater solitude, to spend the rest of his life in deeper contemplation.

The memories of our evenings with him leave us with the warm feeling of having met a rare soul, who had plumbed the utter depths of misery and had

Vedanta-sara

Swami Bhaskareswarananda

(Continued from the previous issue)

16. Nityānitya-vastu-vivekastāvad brahmaiva nityam vastu tato'nyad-akhilam-anityam-iti vivecanam.

Discernment between things permanent and transient: this consists of the understanding that 'Brahman alone is the permanent Substance and all other things are transient.'

YOU HAVE TO DEVELOP THIS POWER of discernment between the real and the unreal. In the world there is pleasure, true, but it is followed by reaction and trouble. To think of the consequence of running after the unreal and the gain of attaining the real, to feel this in one's heart in the light of scriptural knowledge, is called *viveka*. Merge yourself in the real by giving up the unreal with the help of such discernment.

17. Aihikānām srak-candana-vanītādi-viṣaya-bhogānām karma-janyatayānityatvavad-āmuṣmikānām-apyamṛtādi-viṣaya-bhogānām-anityatayā tebhyo nitarām viratiḥ—ihāmutrārtha-phala-bhoga-virāgaḥ.

An utter disregard for objects of enjoyment such as immortality—which are as transitory as the enjoyment of such earthly objects as a garland of flowers, sandal paste, and sex-pleasures, being the results of action—is renunciation of the enjoyment of fruits of action in this world and hereafter.

The text comprises the edited notes of Swami Bhaskareswarananda's classes on *Vedanta-sara*, conducted between 8 December 1954 and 20 January 1955. The notes—taken down by some residents of the Ramakrishna Math, Nagpur—have been edited and reconstructed by Swami Brahmeshananda, Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Chandigarh.

Renunciation or detachment must be there, otherwise life is either intellectual or emotional. *Viveka*, discernment, leads to *vairāgya*, renunciation. It shows the evil consequences of bad actions and the glory of spiritual practice. *Vairāgya* does not mean putting on one dhoti or torn clothes. It means transcendence of earthly and heavenly pleasures. Wearing torn clothes when the mind is full of desires, this will not do.

The inner psychological attraction is towards sense enjoyment. *Karma-janya* means the happiness caused by and dependent upon contact with money, people, name, fame, and the like. When there is no contact, it leads to unhappiness. This is not real happiness; it is second-hand. *Ātmānanda* is first-hand happiness—happiness at any place under all circumstances. The contact with sense-objects leads to spiritual death. Thinking thus, give them up.

18. Śamādayastu—śama-damoparati-titikṣā-samādhāna-śraddhākhyāḥ.

Śamādayaḥ comprise śama, restraint of the outgoing mental propensities, dama, restraint of the external sense organs, uparati, withdrawal of the Self, titikṣā, forbearance, samādhāna, Self-settledness, and śraddhā, faith.

There must be *ṣaṭ-sampatti*, the six virtues, together with *viveka* and *vairāgya*. Know that you are an ordinary person and that you may fail in spite of having *viveka* and *vairāgya*. Your organs naturally go towards worldly enjoyment. Hence, Sadananda advises deliberate control.

19. Śamastāvat—śravaṇādi-vyatirikta-viṣayebhvo manaso nigrahaḥ.

Śama is the curbing of the mind from all objects except scriptural hearing and the like.

Everything other than listening about the Atman is a digression and detrimental to spiritual life. Give up all transitory objects and pleasures. This is true *śravaṇa*. Similarly, think only of the Atman and give up all digressive thoughts. Stop all mental vibrations related to father, mother, money, fame, heavenly desires, and the like. Think of the Chosen Ideal, see the Chosen Ideal, listen about the Chosen Ideal and his words, do his works. When all other digressions are stopped and the dissipation of mental power is arrested, then power will come to the mind, then will spiritual practice be successful.

20. Damaḥ—bāhyendriyāṇām tad-vyatirikta-viṣayebhyo nivartanam.

Dama is the restraint of the external organs from all objects, except those mentioned above.

Mental control alone is not enough. Some foolishly think that their minds are all right, and yet remain in contact with the objects of enjoyments. But the rishis have said that there is an interrelation between body and mind. If there is physical contact with objects, mental disturbance is bound to arise, and vice versa. This is mutual interdependence. So, if you want perfect mental control, then stop physically mixing with others; and if you want physical control, then stop mental digressions. Do not touch anything detrimental to spiritual life: *tad-vyatirikta-viṣayebhyo*. Engage your eyes, ears, hands, your all in divine work. By mental and physical control, energy is preserved.

21. Nivartitānām-eteṣām tad-vyatirikta-viṣayebhyo uparamaṇam-uparatirathavā vihitānām karmaṇām vidhinā parityāgaḥ.

Uparati is the cessation of these external organs so restrained, from the pursuit of objects other than those already mentioned; or it may mean the abandonment of works prescribed according to scriptural injunctions.

In spite of physical and mental control, there is a possibility of relapse. You are in a monastery, so there is control. But do not trust yourself. Samskaras, impressions, are sleeping in the subconscious

mind, and will wake up due to association. Samskaras disappear only on attaining the knowledge of Brahman. Although no thoughts arise in the waking state due to physical and mental control, there is enjoyment in the dream state because of subconscious impressions. To control these sleeping tendencies, *uparati* is needed. To control all the conscious and unconscious tendencies, *śama*, *dama*, and *uparati* are required. In the scriptures *uparati* is also equated with *sannyasa*—*uparati* is the positive practice, *śama* and *dama* are negative. Control of gross digressions is achieved through *śama* and *dama*, while the subtle desires are controlled by *uparati*.

22. Titikṣā—ṣītoṣṇādī-dvandva-sahiṣṇutā.

Titikṣā is the endurance of heat and cold and other pairs of opposites.

Titikṣā, forbearance, means remaining balanced and undisturbed through all the pairs of opposites: heat and cold, the favourable and the unfavourable, good and bad, honour and dishonour, happiness and misery, praise and blame, and so forth. When I respect you, you love me, but when I do not care for you, you hate me. This is not *titikṣā*. You do the Lord's work when you have power, but when you do not have power you do not even want to touch work! Then you fail in *titikṣā*. To maintain mental balance, whether you are the head of a department or the tail of a department, is *titikṣā*.

In the absence of *titikṣā* you will not be able to undertake spiritual practices properly, because you will not get work or circumstances according to your liking at all times. In this relative world sometimes circumstances will be favourable and at other times unfavourable. These will always be there. So, to be able to successfully carry on spiritual practice, you must have *titikṣā*. All our spiritual practices to attain our goal will have to be done in this relative world alone. We cannot go into the sky and subsist on air. We shall have to perform spiritual practices in this relative world alone, keeping our mental balance.

(To be continued)

Mahendranath Gupta: A Guide to Dakshineswar and Kashipur

Swami Chetanananda

(Continued from the previous issue)

THEIR PICNIC WAS ARRANGED at the Gazitola, because the temple manager would not allow them to have it in the Panchavati. M was a little hurt. A devotee then talked to Kiranchandra Datta, the receiver¹⁰ of the Dakshineswar temple, about this. He immediately wrote a strong memo to the temple manager: 'Please allow Revered M and the devotees to have a picnic wherever they want. You clean that place.'

M was very pleased and remarked: 'You see, every spot of Dakshineswar is holy. But God himself had picnics there with the devotees, so that place is saturated with joy. If we have our picnic there, then that joy will be awakened in our minds. One can experience bliss by imitating a particular lila enacted by God. The Master experienced the bliss of Brahman while sitting under that banyan tree, and it still bears witness to those events. The memory of the Master's joyful picnics in that place will intensify the joy of our own picnic. Thus one can connect oneself with God. Otherwise, mere eating is nothing but worldly enjoyment.'¹¹ According to Swami Nityatmananda, M had picnics with the devotees in the Panchavati on 14 January 1924, 30 November 1924, and 28 January 1926.

On 30 November 1924 M made a comment about the picnic: 'It is a joyful function. We shall be able to stay at Dakshineswar for a long time because of this picnic. The minds of the devotees will get deep impressions of the trees, gardens, ponds, ghats, temples, and so on. Later these will remind them of Mother Kali and the Master. Sometimes the Master would encourage devotees to arrange

picnics in the temple garden. An impression becomes deeper if it is connected with good food. The Master would adopt many methods to direct the devotees' minds towards God. Whenever any devotee would come, the Master served him some prasada or gave him something to eat. This would serve two purposes: First, that devotee would remember the food he had eaten; people generally forget verbal advice. Second, the devotee would develop love for the Master unconsciously. His mind would think of the Master's affection because he had given him some food to eat. Eventually this memory would protect him, and give him strength when he struggled for breath in the ocean of maya, almost drowning. Every one of the Master's actions was meant to set an example for others' (10.174-5).

While M and the devotees were returning to Calcutta, M remarked: 'Every particle of dust of the Panchavati is holy and vibrant because it was touched by the feet of God. The trees, plants, and vines of Dakshineswar are gods, ancient rishis, and devotees who are still seeing and enjoying the divine play of God. Truly, they are witnesses of the avatara's lila.' Whenever M visited Dakshineswar, he always embraced and bowed down to the trees (3.235-44).

M's Farsightedness

M was a farsighted rishi. By the Master's grace he sensed what would happen in the future. He wrote in the *Gospel*:

The Master started again for the Panchavati accompanied by M. No one else was with them. Sri

Ramakrishna with a smile narrated to him various incidents of the past years of his life.

Master: 'You see, one day I saw a strange figure covering the whole space from the Kālī temple to the Panchavati. Do you believe this?'

M. remained silent with wonder. He plucked one or two leaves from a branch in the Panchavati and put them in his pocket.

Master: 'See there—that branch has been broken. I used to sit under it.'

M: 'I took a young twig from that tree—I have it at home.'

Master (*with a smile*): 'Why?'

M: 'I feel happy when I look at it. After all this is over, this place will be considered very holy.'¹²

M's *Gospel* has made Dakshineswar a place of pilgrimage like Ayodhya, Vrindaban, Varanasi, and Rameshwaram. His vivid description has drawn people from all over the world to visit Dakshineswar and to know more about Sri Ramakrishna. Moreover, inspired by the *Gospel*, many young people have also left home and joined the Ramakrishna Order. Thirty-five years after that conversation he recorded in the *Gospel*, M witnessed a remarkable result of his detailed chronicle.

In October 1918 M told devotees about the following incident: 'Lord Ronaldshay, the present governor of Bengal, read the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and then went to Dakshineswar with his wife and secretaries. He saw those places which had been mentioned in the *Gospel*. He also greeted Ramlal, knowing that he was the Master's nephew.'¹³

The world is always changing, but truth never changes. Dakshineswar is very different now from what it was during Sri Ramakrishna's time; yet M's chronicle of the Master's message is for all time and will remain vital as long as the sun and moon exist.

Visiting the Kashipur Garden-house

On 30 March 1924 M visited Dakshineswar and the Kashipur garden-house with Dr De Mello, Mr Jinwalla and his wife—a Parsi couple—and some other devotees. In the car on the way to Kashipur, Swami Nityatmananda pointed out the Kashipur cremation ground where the Master's body had

been cremated and whispered something to Dr De Mello. The doctor then asked M, who was in the back seat: 'Shall we stop at the Kashipur cremation ground?' Hearing the words 'Kashipur cremation ground' M felt deep pain, as if he had been stung by a scorpion. His face turned grave. Nityatmananda asked De Mello not to raise that topic again, because this would cause M great pain.¹⁴

The car stopped at the western side of the Kashipur house. M bowed down at the entrance. An Armenian Christian family had rented the house at the time. They were very hospitable and allowed people to visit the house where the Master had lived.

While waiting for permission to enter the house, M took the group and showed them the kitchen, the servants' quarters, and the room where Holy Mother had lived in the north-eastern corner of the house. He pointed out three rooms that had previously been the stable where young attendants of the Master had stayed. M removed his shoes, entered one of the rooms, and said: 'One morning here the young disciples of the Master who later became monks sang this song about Shiva: "Lord Shiva is adorned with the crescent moon on his forehead, the Ganga in his matted hair, and a trident in his hand. His body is besmeared with the ashes, a garland hangs around his neck." The all-renouncing Shiva was their ideal. This was the training place of future teachers.'

M then walked to the pond that was to the east of the house. He went to its southern ghat and said: 'Sometimes we used to sit here.' He then pointed

Kashipur garden-house



to a mango tree to the south of the ghat and said: 'Narendra would sit under that tree and light a *dhuni* fire, then practise meditation. During the summer the devotees would meditate on this ghat. It has been thirty-seven years since I last visited this place.'

M walked to that holy mango tree and embraced it, and then bowed down. When he arose, he continued: 'One night Narendra was meditating near the *dhuni* fire and his body was covered with mosquitoes, but he had no body-consciousness. His mind was absorbed in Brahman.' When the group reached the garden-path to the east of the house, M pointed out a pine tree and said: 'This is our old friend.' M and his companions thus circumambulated the Kashipur house where the Master had lived during his last days.

When M and his companions received permission to enter the house, they climbed the steps to the Master's second-floor room and entered it. M prostrated on the floor at the south-west corner, where the Master had rested while he was alive. There is a door on the south wall of the room and a shuttered window on the west. M pointed to an area two yards from the western window and said: 'The Master's bedding was here.' The Master would lie on a mattress with his head near the southern wall and feet towards the north. M sat near where the Master's feet would have been and meditated for some time.

He then went out the door on the south side of the room and walked out onto the roof overlooking the garden compound; he stood near the western railing and held onto it. Then he and the devotees went downstairs to thank the host. After that, the party and M left for his Calcutta residence at the Morton Institution.

In the evening gathering, Dr Bakshi asked: 'Why didn't the Master sleep on a bed?'

M: 'It was convenient for the Master to sleep on the floor. His body was weak. There was a mat on the cement floor, then on top of that a cotton carpet, and over that a mattress.'

Jagabandhu: 'Did the Master ever walk on the roof?'

M: 'Seldom.'

Jagabandhu: 'Did he go for walk in the garden?'

M: 'A few times. He walked on 1 January 1886, of course. The Master fulfilled his wish.' [On that day Sri Ramakrishna became the wish-fulfilling tree and blessed the devotees, saying, 'Be illumined'] (5.119–24).

On 30 November 1924 M revisited Kashipur with Dr Bakshi, Binay, and Jagabandhu, but this time they were not allowed to enter the house. The Christian gentleman was a patient of Dr Bakshi, who had presented him with a picture of Sri Ramakrishna and asked him to hang it on the wall of the Master's room. The man later did so, but his pastor had objected and asked him to remove the picture. Moreover, the man did not want to do anything that would make his Christian community upset. However, M gave the Christian gentleman a copy of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna—Part I*, and asked: 'May we have a look around the garden?' 'Of course,' he replied. The devotees were upset because they were not allowed to see the Master's room. With a heavy heart, M said to Dr Bakshi: 'Here one should come as a learner and not as a preacher.'

As they walked around the garden surrounding the house, M said: 'Every particle of dust in Dakshineswar and Kashipur is pure. These trees are gods and rishis incognito. They are hiding their true forms to watch and enjoy the divine play of the avatara.' M pointed to an old tree at the south-east corner of the garden, near a bend in the path, and remarked: 'This tree felt the same air that touched Sri Ramakrishna's body.' M then embraced that tree.

M stopped near the bend in the path. All of a sudden he became indrawn and his eyes became moist. He said: 'What a great event took place on this spot! It was 1 January 1886, a holiday. Girish and other devotees were visiting from Calcutta. The Master felt a little better, so he came down from his room and walked in the garden. It was three o'clock in the afternoon. The devotees followed the Master. When the Master stopped at this spot, the devotees bowed down to him one after another. He blessed them, saying, "May you be illumined". This

blessing awakened their inner consciousness and they each had a vision of their *ishṭa*, Chosen Deity. Everyone was overwhelmed with bliss.’

M then became quiet and still. When he regained his normal mood, he prostrated himself on the garden path where the Master had become the Kalpataru, the wish-fulfilling tree, and put some dust from the path onto his head. He slowly got up and walked to the car, giving the garden one last lingering look (5.119–24).

In the Footsteps of Sri Ramakrishna

Throughout the world there are many holy places frequented by people on pilgrimage who desire to draw closer to God. The life of Sri Ramakrishna is made more real and immediate when it is visualized against the landscape that was its setting. Goethe said: ‘If you want to understand the poet, you must visit his country.’

Following the footsteps of Sri Ramakrishna, in 1997 Nirmal Kumar Roy wrote a book in Bengali called *Charan Chinha Dhare* (Holding the Footprints). In this book he wrote the history of the places Sri Ramakrishna had visited, their present condition, and how to reach them. He described Calcutta, North 24-Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly, Bankura, Burdwan, Nadia, Khulna in East Bengal, Vaidyanath, Varanasi, Prayag, Mathura, and Vrindaban. In 1979 he wrote another important book in Bengali called *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Sam-sparshe* ([People Who Came] in Contact with Sri Ramakrishna). The main source for these two books was M’s *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*.

After closely associating with M for a number of years, Swami Nityatmananda wanted to visit the places in Calcutta and its suburbs where Sri Ramakrishna had gone. He considered them to be modern places of pilgrimage. When he first approached M with his plan, M discouraged him. But later, observing Nityatmananda’s enthusiasm for seeing the holy places connected with the Master, M joyfully gave him permission and guidance. When Nityatmananda asked where he should start, M replied: ‘Be quick! Please start from this area

[Central Calcutta].’

On 27 May 1932, eight days before he passed away, M dictated a list of places that Nityatmananda recorded:

1. Rajendra Mitra’s house on Bechu Chatterjee Street, which Sri Ramakrishna visited. Keshab Sen came there to meet the Master.

2. Thanthania Kali Temple: When the Master was sixteen years old, he used to sing there for the Divine Mother.

3. The Tol [Sanskrit school] of Ramkumar, the Master’s brother, on Bechu Chatterjee Street. It is now a Radha-Krishna temple.

4. A hut with a tiled roof on Bechu Chatterjee Street, where the Master and Ramkumar lived. It is opposite the Laha’s house.

5. Digambar Mitra’s house on Jhamapukur Lane, where the Master performed rituals for the family shrine.

6. Vijaykrishna Goswami’s residence at 27 Mechhua Bazar Street, which the Master visited when he became ill.

7. The Navavidhan Brahmo Samaj in Mechhua Bazar, which the Master visited. He also went to Ishan Mukhopadhyay’s house on the same street and had lunch there.

8. Keshab Sen’s Lily Cottage, at the junction of Mechhua Bazar Street and Circular Road [now Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy Road], which Sri Ramakrishna visited many times. Keshab worshipped the feet of the Master in the shrine upstairs.

9. Badurbagan, where the Master went to visit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar.

10. The Sadharan Brahmo Samaj on Cornwallis Street [now Bidhan Sarani], where the Master went to meet Narendra.

11. Narendra’s house in Simulia.

12. Ram’s house behind the Oxford Mission. [It has since been demolished to make way for a road.]

13. Manomohan’s house on Simla Street.

14. Kashi Mallick’s temple on Harrison Road [now Mahatma Gandhi Road], where the Master went to visit Mother Simhavahini.

15. Mani Mallick's house in Sinduriapatti, where Sri Ramakrishna attended a Brahmo festival. It has since been replaced by a Jain temple.

16. Sutapatti, in Barabazar, where he visited Lakshminarayan Marwari.

17. The Chaitanya Sabha and Navin Sen's house in Kolutola.

18. Rani Rasmani's house in Jan Bazar.

19. The Methodist Church in Taltala, where the Master attended a service.

20. The Kalighat temple in South Calcutta.

21. The Museum.

22. Alipur Zoo.

23. Jagannath Ghat.

24. Koila Ghat.

25. The Maidan, where the Master saw a circus perform.

26. The viceroy's palace. The Master saw it and made a remark: 'The Mother revealed to me that it was made merely of clay bricks laid one on top of another.'

27. Jaygopal Sen's house in Ratan Sarkar Square in Barabazar.

28. Jadu Mallick's house in Pathuriaghata.

29. The Adi Brahmo Samaj in Chitpur.

30. Devendranath Tagore's house in Jorasanko.

31. The Harisabha in Jorasanko.

32. A devotee's house in Haritaki-bagan.

33. Ram's garden and Suresh's garden in Kankurgachhi.

34. Dr Kali's house in Shyambazar.

35. The house in Shyampukur where Sri Ramakrishna received treatment.

36. The following devotees' houses in Baghbazar: Nanda Basu, Golap-ma, Yogin-ma, Balaram Basu, and Girishchandra Ghosh.

37. The following temples in Baghbazar: Siddheshwari Kali, Madanmohan.

38. M's rented house at Kambuliatala in Shyampukur.

39. Vishwanath Upadhyay's house in Shyampukur.

40. Deven Majumdar's house on Nimu Goswami Lane in North Calcutta.

41. The Star Theatre on Beadon Street, where the Master saw the *Chaitanya Lila* performed.

42. Adhar Sen's house in Shobhabazar.

43. Dinanath Mukhopadhyay's house near the Baghbazar bridge, which Sri Ramakrishna visited with Mathur.

44. The Master attended the festival of the Brahmo Samaj at Kashi Mitra's house in Nandan-bagan.

45. Mahendra Goswami's house in Simulia.

That very day Swami Nityatmananda visited several places in the morning, afternoon, and evening. He reported his experiences to M in detail the next day so that M could visualize those places that had been touched by the feet of Sri Ramakrishna.

On 28 May 1932 M told Nityatmananda about some other places connected with the Master. These are located in various Calcutta suburbs.

1. The Kashipur garden house.

2. Beni Pal's garden house in Sinthi.

3. The Sarvamangala temple in Kashipur.

4. The Kashipur cremation ground.

5. The Dashamahavidya temple in Baranagar.

6. The house of Thakur Dada (Narayandas Bandyopadhyay), who was a narrator of the scriptures in Baranagar.

7. Joy Mukhopadhyay's shrine and the Ganga ghat at Baranagar.

8. Two houses in Baranagar belonging to Haramohan and Mani Mallick.

9. Patbari of Bhagavat Acharya—a Vaishnava Ashrama—in Baranagar.

10. Natabar Panja's oil mill in Alambazar.

11. Two garden-houses in Dakshineswar belonging to Shambhu Mallick and Jadu Mallick.

12. The Dakshineswar temple garden, the playground of Sri Ramakrishna.

13. Swami Yogananda's house in Dakshineswar.

14. Rasik's house. Rasik was a sweeper of the Dakshineswar temple. The Master secretly cleaned the privy in Rasik's house with his own hair and prayed to the Divine Mother, 'Mother, destroy the ego of my brahminical caste.'

15. Krishnakishore's house in Ariadaha.

16. Gadadhar's Patbari in Ariadaha.

17. Mati Sil's Thakur-bari and lake in Belgharia. To demonstrate how to meditate on the formless God, the Master took a devotee [M] and showed him big fish swimming freely in the lake. One can imagine the fish as human souls playing in the ocean of Satchidananda.

18. Panihati: Mani Sen's house, the festival grounds, and Raghav Pandit's Thakur-bari.


19. Kamarhati: The Krishna temple and Gopalma's place.

20. Kalna, where the Master visited Bhagavandas Babaji.

21. A garden-house in Sinthi where the Master met Dayananda Saraswati.

22. Navachaitanya Mitra's house in Konnagar.

23. The timber yard of Vishwanath Upadhyay in Belur, which is now the present Belur Math (15.412-36).

Although Swami Nityatmananda had already visited with M many of the places listed, he began to revisit those places and report back to M. At that time M would relate many anecdotes about the Master in which those places had played a part. The swami observed that M's health was failing day by day, so he tried to collect from M information about those holy places and anecdotes about the Master concerning them. He also wanted to list their old and new addresses. Nityatmananda could not complete the project, however. The unique guide, the chronicler and custodian of Sri Ramakrishna's life and message, left this world on 4 June 1932, a week after Nityatmananda began his project. 


Notes and References

10. A person appointed by a court administrator to take into custody the property or funds of others, pending court decision.
11. *Srima Darshan*, 10.178.
12. M, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 332.
13. *Srima Samipe*, comp. and ed. Swami Chetanananda (Calcutta: Udbodhan Office, 1996), 276.
14. *Srima Darshan*, 5.118-19.

(Continued from page 336)

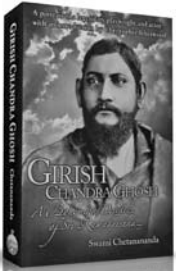
Ahamkara is verily the axle of delusion. It appropriates the sterling virtues of the Self, relegates the Self to the background, and urges its dubious credentials to recognition. It is the pseudo-Self that effectively camouflages the Self and then struts about posing as the Self. Sri Ramakrishna compares it to an onion: as the onion, when peeled, shows itself a nonentity bereft of any inner core, egoism's true status as a shadowy nothing becomes patent when subjected to rigorous analysis.

Sri Ramana Maharshi narrates a picturesque story to describe the obstreperous antics of the ego posing as the Self. The story runs thus: A certain stranger gains entry into a marriage hall throbbing with the rapturous din of wedding festivity. Casually, he goes to the bride's party and talks to them in such a peremptory and condescending tone that he is believed by them to be a close relation of the bridegroom. Then he unobtrusively walks to the bridegroom's party and speaks to them so ingratiatingly and meekly that he easily passes himself off as kin of the bride. It so happens that soon the two parties meet and start discussing the stranger. The moment the stranger gets scent of this dangerous dialogue about him, he quietly slinks away, never to be seen again.

Like the audacious stranger, the ego lords over the Self by its aggressive postures, asserting its supremacy. At the same time it courts *sharira*, the physical body, by its words and acts of sycophancy. Thus, by its crafty dealings with the Self on the one hand and the body on the other, it manages to hold its sway until finally its behaviour becomes suspect and comes under the searchlight of discrimination. The ego, outwardly a blustering bully, is in fact a weak-kneed coward who remains in constant fear of detection of his mala fides. Shamelessly it sports the trappings of the Self and unscrupulously bestrides the stage of worldly dealings. The ascendancy of the Self is contingent upon the exposure of the bully of the ego for what it is. 

REVIEWS

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA,
publishers need to send **two** copies of their latest publications.



**Girish Chandra Ghosh:
A Bohemian Devotee of
Sri Ramakrishna**
Swami Chetanananda

Vedanta Society of St Louis, 205 S Skinker
Blvd, St Louis, MO 63105, USA. Web-
site: www.vedantastl.org. 2009. 495 pp.
\$29.95.

Just as to know Dr Samuel Johnson well a Boswell is needed, Girishchandra Ghosh can best be known and understood through Swami Chetanananda's present volume. This is a biography that presents the highlights of the story of a great and often misunderstood genius, describing and analysing myriad aspects of his life, including intimate details of his thoughts and experiences against the backdrop of momentous social, historical, literary, political, and spiritual events that took place during Girish's lifetime.

The volume's subtitle describes Girish interestingly as 'bohemian' as well as 'devotee', which may at first glance appear to be a contradiction in terms. An artist and intellectual who is unconventional in thought and behaviour is hardly the material with which a devotee is fashioned. But herein lies the magic of Sri Ramakrishna, who could mould any clay into any shape. As we read the volume, we realize that Girish's unconventionality was one of his strong points when it came to the kind of whole-hearted devotion he had for his guru; this is especially evident in the incident of giving 'the power of attorney'. A regular devotee could not possibly have done this with the kind of verve Girish managed.

These and many other momentous events in the life of Girish Ghosh come alive as we become engrossed in the volume—I must confess that it is so absorbing a narrative that often I read it for sheer enjoyment, forgetting completely that I would have to write a review too! The volume acquires the stature of a masterpiece of the biographical genre, mainly due to Swami Chetanananda's inimitable style as well as to the manner in which he analyses the multifaceted personality of such a complex character.

When Swami Chetanananda writes: 'Girish was a perfectionist. Before writing any play, he read and did extensive research on his subject, then meditated on the characters. He was able to make those characters live because of his wide experience, vast imagination, and god-given talent' (75), he is not only talking about Girish Ghosh, the father of modern Bengali theatre, but also about himself—possibly unconsciously—because the book has all the qualities of wide reading, extensive research, deep meditation, far-reaching experience, vast imagination, and God-given talent. The balance and equanimity of the tone that pervades the volume is possibly one of its most noteworthy features.

Beginning with a chapter entitled 'I Am a Sinner', the volume encompasses the early life and gradual evolution of Girish through various stages: as an accountant, actor, playwright, dramatic director, and finally as the atheist turning devotee. Many interesting chapters are devoted to some of his epoch-making plays and to how he revolutionized the Bengali stage, bringing women as actresses, personally training some of the best performers on stage, and so on. These chapters giving details of Girish's public life are followed by chapters delving into his inner life, skillfully and sensitively portrayed by the biographer.

Two of the most extraordinary chapters are twenty and twenty-four, in which Swami Chetanananda describes Girish Ghosh's days with Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Sarada Devi, and the monastic disciples and devotees of the Master. The Master's vision about the actor, even before he met Girish, his rational explanation of Girish's weaknesses as harmless, incapable of vitiating Girish's life, his stress on the redeeming qualities of Girish—such as strength of character, boldness, courage, and hatred of hypocrisy—makes the volume reach greater depth, as Ramakrishna's words have an authenticity difficult to find in any other source.

Girish's relationship with Vivekananda—in spite of the twenty-year age gap between the two, 'they behaved as if they were the same age and became close friends' (339)—is a reiteration of the popular saying

about birds of a feather. These two towering personalities shared many similarities—‘Both men were geniuses and were extremely creative; both were cynics and at the same time lovers of God; both were proud of their physical and intellectual powers; both had struggled and sought a guru. ... Both of these rebellious souls became disciples of Ramakrishna’ (339). Chapter Twenty-one recounts numerous incidents of their inimitable interaction.

Chapter Twenty-two describes Girish’s first glimpse of the Holy Mother’s sacred feet, his subsequent visits to Jayrambati, his recognition of the Holy Mother as the deity whose vision had saved him from a serious illness, and his unequivocal declaration of Mother’s divinity: ‘Yes, Mother—the Divine Mother—has appeared as a poor village girl, living in a remote hamlet, away from the din and bustle of a town where life reflects only the formal and artificial ways of worldly-wise and sophisticated men and women’ (356). The chapter abounds in the most touching poignant descriptions revealing the emotional dimension of a person whose intellect has been the talking point in the major part of the volume.

The chapter entitled ‘Further Glimpses of Girish’ is also remarkable. It can be read in a variety of contexts; especially for those who are seeking to learn life skills, it has numerous parameters for self-assessment and self-improvement.

All in all, a must-read for anyone concerned with the Ramakrishna tradition, a valuable sourcebook for those interested in Girish Ghosh’s life and legacy, and a research guide for those working with the biographical genre.

Dr Sumita Roy

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contextual meaning and grammatical explanation of each word used in the verse. The sole objective of this literal translation, based on the Pali edition of K R Norman and Oskar von Hinüber, is to acquaint readers with the etymology and the annotated meaning of each Pali term, enabling thus a rich cognizance of the text’s phonetic pattern. The author’s introduction provides an appraisal of the different connotations of the word ‘Dhammapada’ as well as the syntactical structure of the Pali language. A transliteration index and a list of abbreviations precede the main body of the work.

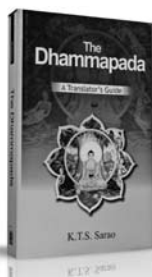
This pioneering translation deserves genuine appreciation both for its fluency of English and its largely correct rendering of original Pali terminology. However, there are sporadic erroneous translations, incongruous linguistic expressions, and seeming grammatical inconsistencies. For instance, the English translation of verse 8 starts with ‘contemplating pleasant things’, while in the vocabulary we find that a ‘not’ is missing at the beginning of this clause, rendering in consequence an opposite meaning (10). The same happens in verse 258 (316–7).

There are also some clumsy expressions like ‘avoidance all evil’ (227), ‘do-gooder’ (270), ‘texts have non-study as an impurity’ (296), ‘of two-footed the one with eyes’ (335) which are clear editorial lapses. There are stray grammatical inconsistencies as well, like the translations in verses 360–1 of *ghāṇena*, *jivhāya*, *kāyena*, and *vācāya*, which are all instrumental singular but have been unevenly translated as ‘with the nose’, ‘with the tongue’, ‘in the body’, and ‘in the speech’, (448–9). Despite his earnest efforts, the devoted Buddhist scholar of international repute appears to deviate from the literal translation of some words such as *kākasūrena*, which he renders as ‘unconscientious’ (299–300) instead of ‘as impudent as a crow’; or *n’atthi buddhānaminjitam* as ‘there is no movement in the buddhas’, ignoring the root meaning of *injitam*: ‘shaking’.

Even though Prof. Sarao appears to closely follow Ven. Narada, his remarkable success undoubtedly lies in achieving a far improved version. This splendid work will serve as a useful tool for scholars and researchers who wish to probe into Pali philology in general and undertake the linguistic study of the *Dhammapada* in particular.

Prof. V V S Saibaba

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***The Dhammapada:
A Translator's Guide***
K T S Sarao

Munshiram Manoharlal, PO Box 5715,
54 Rani Jhansi Road, New Delhi 110 055.
Website: www.mrmlbooks.com. 2009. xvi
+ 530 pp. Rs 995.

Prof. K T S Sarao’s painstaking verbatim English translation of the Pali *Dhammapada* has the unique distinction of being the first of its kind. Each of the *Dhammapada* verses is presented in Devanagari script with its corresponding transliteration and English rendering, followed by a vocabulary with the

REPORTS



March past by students of Narainpur



Srimat Swami Smarananandaji laying the foundation stone at Narainpur

News from Branch Centres

Ramakrishna Math, Viveknagar, organized an all-Tripura devotees' conference at the Ashrama on 14 March 2010; it was attended by 587 devotees.

Srimat Swami Gitanandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, inaugurated the renovated building for the library and computer centre at the newly acquired premises of **Ramakrishna Math, Kankurgachhi**, on 24 March, Ramanavami Day.

Srimat Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, laid the foundation stone for the proposed higher secondary school building at **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narainpur**, on 24 March; and on 28 March the swami inaugurated the blood bank unit of the ashrama hospital.

Achievements

Julia Nyamik Lollen, a class-12 student of the school at **Ramakrishna Mission, Aalo**, won the first prize for the north-east region in the All-India Essay Writing Competition 2009, conducted by the United Nations Information Center for India and Bhutan on 13 August 2009.

Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira, Belur, has been identified as one of the 149 colleges with potential for excellence (CPE) from among nearly 7,000 colleges all over India, under section 12(b) of the University Grants Commission Act.

Relief

Cyclone Aila Relief • **Belur Math** distributed 1,050 textbooks to 75 Aila-affected students in Hingalganj block, North 24-Parganas district, on 26 March. **Belgharia** centre gave 958 saris, 1,020 lungis, 19 dhotis, 402 shirts, 273 pants, 477 churidars, 200 blankets, and 25 mosquito nets to 1,044

families of 17 villages in Sandheskhali I and II blocks, North 24-Parganas district, during March.

Flood Relief • On 26 March **Hyderabad** centre distributed 280 handlooms to needy weavers of Nagaladinne village in Kurnool district who had lost their looms in the flood of October 2009. **Kamarpukur** centre handed over 100 blankets to flood victims in Khanakul II block, Hooghly district, on 13 January.

Winter Relief • 20,016 blankets were distributed to needy people affected by the severity of winter through the following centres. **Aalo**: 1,700; **Almora**: 300; **Asansol**: 980; **Bankura**: 865; **Baranagar Mission**: 1,500; **Belgharia**: 475; **Cherrapunji**: 2,800; **Contai**: 100; **Deoghar**: 2,000; **Ghatshila**: 197; **Jamshedpur**: 154; **Jayrambati**: 1,058; **Kamarpukur**: 1,700; **Kanpur**: 523; **Khetri**: 61; **Malda**: 13; **Narendrapur**: 600; **Purulia**: 300; **Ramharipur**: 1,603; **Ranchi Morabadi**: 416; **Sargachhi**: 800; **Sikra Kulingram**: 300; **Taki**: 71; **Vrindaban**: 1,500. Besides, the following centres distributed various winter garments to the needy: **Almora**: 100 used woollen sweaters; **Kanpur**: 464 sweaters and 33 woollen chadars; **Purulia**: 815 sweaters.

Distress Relief • The following centres distributed various items to people in distress. **Agartala**: 600 saris and 200 dhotis; **Baranagar Mission**: 700 saris; **Belgharia**: 1,513 saris, 620 dhotis, 777 lungis, 556 shirts, 424 pants, and 447 children's garments; **Bhubaneswar**: 1,350 kg rice, 650 kg dal, 700 kg chira, 500 kg peas, 650 l palm oil, 400 kg salt, 96 kg milk powder, and 370 saris; **Jalpaiguri**: 300 saris; **Jamshedpur**: 82 saris and 70 dhotis; **Kanpur**: 100 kg rice, 140 kg dal, 3 tins of refined oil, 140 kg sugar, 70 kg vegetables, 6 cooking vessels, 60 bed-sheets, 52 soap bars, 52 packets of soap powder, 52 toothbrushes, and 52 tubes of toothpaste; **Narainpur**: 2,500 school bags, 3,000 jerseys, and other items.

Fire Relief • **Bankura** centre distributed 200 kg rice, 100 kg dal, 60 kg flour, 40 mosquito nets, 60 saris, 200 notebooks, and 40 pens to 40 families whose houses had been ravaged by a devastating fire at Jhola village of Sarenga block in Bankura district, in March.



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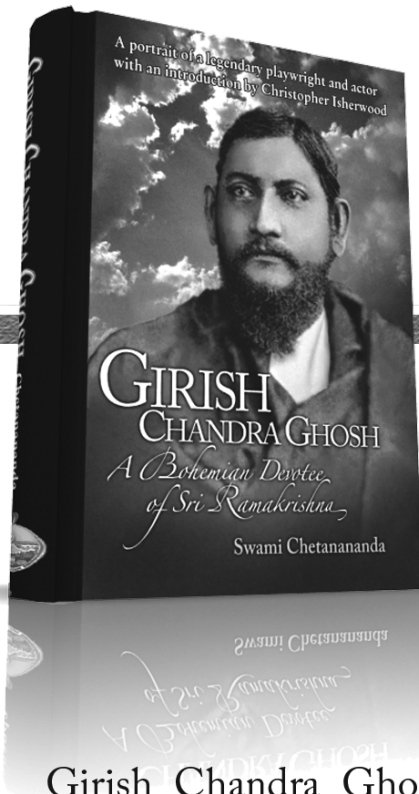
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